You're His Hope (Post-3.09 Olicity)

by ChronicOlicity

Summary

Felicity struggling to save Oliver's humanity after losing him to the League of Assassins. Anything else would legit be a spoiler. Expect drama, romance, angst, humor, plot and plot TWISTS. Sparked by some amazing Tumblr theories I apologize in advance for completely ruining.

(Originally posted on FF)

Notes

Title: You're His Hope
Pairing: Oliver Queen/Felicity Smoak

Context in the Arrow world:

Definitely post-Winter 2014 finale (AKA episode 9), building on some Tumblr theories floating around (which I've recently discovered and joined, by the way. Jeez that place is amazing.)

Anyway, this is my first Arrow fic, definitely in the spirit of an Olicity shipper, but not in a huge sappy crazy way. I have a plot to write too (for now). Comment if you enjoyed it, maybe request a scene or a thing you want me to put in, haven't figured out this thing yet. Also, I'm obviously not a massive DC comics reader (I did lift a few names from the DC universe though, so apologies if I use them weirdly), so if I don't follow the comics, it's because I haven't read them. I just watch the TV show and think that Olicity should end up together by the series finale, if there's any justice in this world. No pressure. Anyway, read and enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Felicity squinted through the fine mist of rain, under the rim of her steadily dripping umbrella. There were people everywhere, beneath crude handwritten banners, picketing graphic images of genocidal violence — shouting, all of them shouting.

SEND MOBAGO HOME

TAXPAYERS FUND GENOCIDAL MANIAC

JUSTICE FOR THE CHILDREN

The protest leaders were on repeat, shouting the same tirade against Ogonwe Mobago, the former Secretary of State of Nyasir, an East African nation that didn't make the headlines in Western media for off-the-charts poverty or starvation, but the genocidal civil war that ended in a loss of about 20,000 lives, some of them still missing because of bargains with the International Criminal Court. Mobago wasn't going to testify as to where the bodies were and incriminate his former President unless he received immunity. Mobago only agreed to meet in a "neutral" location, which was a five-star hotel in London Strand, in order to discuss a plea deal.

So far, the police remained unmoved, standing in the rain with their helmets stoically dripping onto neon yellow vests. She winced when one of the megaphones shrieked in a burst of feedback, and moved further away to put some distance between her and them. Her feet were swimming inside her shoes, from wearing flats instead of sturdy boots. Every time someone moved, a new wave of water rushed into her shoes.

"Anything?"

Felicity shook her head, even though Diggle couldn't see her. "The cameras aren't picking up on anything."

"Should I change position?" Roy asked, crackling over the rain and static interference. Felicity swore the signal was worse in London than it was in Starling, but nobody believed her.

Tongue poking between her lips, Felicity balanced her master tablet in one hand, the umbrella in the other, and flicked through the area map. By virtue of GPS trackers, Felicity had each of their locations digitally marked. They'd each taken a corner of the triangular blockade, Roy was watching the rooftops, Diggle was patrolling the crowd for anyone suspicious.

Felicity updated the calculations for the sniper's program she'd developed, calculating the best angles for a long-range assassin to shoot at the area cordoned off in front of the hotel. Mobago's car — based on the custom specs she'd hacked from various security correspondences — was pretty much proofed for bazookas, just shy of nuclear attack. Bulletproof glass, reinforced doors, alarm system — it was a bunker. They didn't have to worry about transit. It was the minuscule window between the safety of the hotel and the safety of his expensive bad-guy car.

When Mobago left the hotel for his car, he'd be vulnerable to attack, something all of them were actively trying to prevent for various reasons — ones that stretched dangerously thin every time the protesters reminded them of the atrocities Mobago was accused of.

"Calculating trajectories," she said, ignoring the nagging voice at the back of her head to let Mobago get what was coming to him. "Anybody know a good way to wash out your brain? Seriously guys,
this program is *dark.* And it was. Based on a constant uplink to weather, light and visibility information, the program could calculate based on the stats (height, layout, occupancy) of the buildings in the designated areas. Along with a few other unsavory apps, Felicity kept it regularly shrouded in encryption only she could break, and even then only in cases of extreme emergency.

Which this was. "Budge about thirty feet to your right," Felicity said, reading off the report. "Watch the building with the stone crest on the front — security's thinnest on that rooftop...and one of the guards is asleep. Seriously? It's like you're begging someone to assassinate Mobago."

They mostly ignored the latter part, which she couldn't really blame them for. She could hear the cogs in Roy's pretty head turning as he tried to pick out the right building in a sea of stone and steel and glass. "The unicorn one?" he asked, finally.

"Yup. It's a lion *and* a unicorn, and it's the crest of England. Fun and totally situation-inappropriate fact — the unicorn actually doesn't stand for what the British want on their PJs, it symbolizes the folklore in their history and the lion stands for —"

There was a brief pop of static as Roy disconnected.

Felicity frowned, stung by the rejection. "The American public school system."

"I don't think the American way of educating has anything to do with why Roy's on edge," Dig reminded her, gently. "He's just never done this before."

All humor evaporated like the cold rain hitting the steam grate at the side of the road. Felicity was quiet for a moment, the jagged tear inside her chest ripping free of the messy stitching she'd done with her eyes blurred from crying. "None of us have, Dig," she said, so quietly that she wasn't sure he'd heard.

Then —

"I know." Dig's voice was hoarse from the hurt, incomparable to the one she wrestled with, because it was one and the same. He took a steady breath, and Felicity knew he was slipping back into his soldier persona, the one that reacted calm and cool to danger, the rationality to the chaos. "But we know it's probably going to be him."

Felicity found herself tapping out the surveillance program she'd been running for the last year from the Foundry computers, the ones pegged to find just one face — his face. After months of 30%-and-below matches and inconclusive results, after searching for a ghost who for all accounts and purposes had no desire to be found — bam. A 75.6% match, a miracle in the darkness before the first dawn. The fact that it'd coincided with chatter from ARGUS sources that the League was planning to intervene in the fate of a world leader, Mobago's controversial choice of bargaining location…and pure insanity from all that *nothing*…

Even Felicity had trouble distinguishing the truth from wishful thinking, the only comfort being that computer programs didn't sense desperation. That murky picture, grabbed from one of the street surveillance cameras by the River Thames — a brief flash of pale skin beneath a hood, too indistinct to make out unless it'd been run through countless adjustments. But it was enough to get them all to London and standing in a wet street, searching the rooftops and the buildings for a sign that the League had sent its assassin after all.

"Do you think..." Felicity hesitated, then gulped and continued. "Do you think it's him?"

She realized how stupid the question sounded after she'd said it. It was her intel, her program, her
desperation that had brought them to London in the first place. Smoothing a hand over her humidity-frizzed hair, she got herself together again.

"Sorry, I'm just being desperate, and sad, and crazy —"

"Felicity," Dig said, firmly. "You're not crazy. You're doing what Oliver would have wanted you to do."

Felicity bit her lip at the name — more in surprise that it still had the capacity to hurt her, after all this time. She was perilously close to tears, perilously close to admitting that she wasn't holding it together, that she needed to hear him, needed to see him, hear her name in his voice…

The League of Assassins had swallowed Oliver up because the idiot had one of his sweeping, self-sacrificing moments of bravado and neither Felicity, Diggle or Roy had been close enough to stick another sleeping dart in his moronic neck. The League had given Starling — Oliver Queen — the Arrow — an ultimatum. He was either with them or against them, no in-betweens. So he went with them as the Arrow, but he left them as Oliver Queen, like the resurrected ghost he was and the living person he'd never been, claimed again by the darkness of the pit.

They'd tracked the League's movement for months, with results flimsier than wet paper. Tracked was a professional word for the increasingly desperate set of favors, data-mining and satellite-hacking that'd gone on while they tried to piece together the unexplainable acts of violence that were most likely the work of the League. All the while hoping that a mysterious archer would never resurface in the reports, because it would mean that Oliver had finally caved and was working for the League. And that would, and could only happen when Ra's al Ghul was satisfied that Oliver Queen's conscience had weathered away to nothing. So he'd be The Arrow, just The Arrow, the symbol, not the person beneath the hood.

Stop. Stop. Felicity hit the brakes on her imagination, the one that had run well-rehearsed circles during her sleepless hours, her waking nights in her empty bed. The one that held her in a death-grip for doubting Oliver's humanity, for doubting that he could lose it after all that, after everything he'd — they'd — been through. But she feared. Always. Because it was Oliver, and she found out after he left that she couldn't bear the thought of him without his humanity.

Instead, she looked up at the ceiling of her umbrella, taut against the steady drum of the cold London rain, and took a deep breath, blinking the tears away, the tears for Oliver's tenuous humanity.

"What are we doing, Dig? What am I doing?" she said, softly.

"You're hoping."

She exhaled in surprise, because of what he'd said, and because the voice wasn't just from her earpiece. Felicity spun around to see Diggle standing outside her umbrella, the shoulders of his leather jacket dripping from the lack of umbrella he refused to use because it hampered visibility, smiling steadily at her stricken face.

Diggle reached out and squeezed her shoulder with a warm, steady hand, showing her that he was sure. That she'd made him sure. "You're his hope, Felicity. Don't give up on him just yet."

After a beat, she smiled, and nodded.

"We'll get him back," she said, clutching the tablet to her chest, feeling like her heart was going to burst. "Thanks, Dig. Thank you."

For an instant, everything was bright again, and Felicity felt the hope. But then the moment shattered.
Their hands both went to their earpieces as they heard the telltale pop of Roy reconnecting.

"Guys — something's wrong."

Then, right on cue, everything started to go wrong.
Almost

It was the shudder of something unseen but felt, it was the sparks flying through the air before they burst into flame. The hotel doors slid smoothly open, and Mobago's security personnel filed out, and signaled for the waiting car. The chants got louder, more furious, galvanizing the air with so much hatred that Felicity felt the chill beneath her coat.

Then something crashed, and the shouts suddenly reached a crescendo of triumphant screams.

"Someone cut through the wires — the barricade's down!" Roy shouted, over the ominous shriek of the steel frames screeching across concrete. "I can't see anything!"

Felicity and Diggle looked at each other.

"Go!" Felicity snapped into full-gear, pulling up the surveillance on all the rooftops. Diggle took off into the crowd, shouldering through the protesters that had overturned the police-imposed block between the hated leader and the rest of the world.

She checked every single one for an alert — but there was nothing — nothing yet. While she was still scanning, Roy tried to beep through. She tapped the button for an open link, impatiently scrolling through the feeds.

"What, Roy? I can't see anything yet…"

"Felicity," said Roy, eerily quiet. "I found it. The wire wasn't cut. Someone shot through it. With an arrow."

"Grab it. We can check for DNA — oh!" A gigantic man barreled past Felicity, catching her on the shoulder and forcing her to stumble back into someone else, who shouted angrily at being accidentally poked with her umbrella and elbowed her in the back, knocking her glasses askew.

"You okay?" Roy asked urgently.

"No — but they're getting violent." Felicity adjusted her glasses. She was standing pretty much in her own little radius, since the rest of the protesters had moved in to try and force their way past the police. "Someone just called me a wanker, whatever that means — which probably isn't good. Keep watching for him, and hold onto that arrow — we don't want any evidence lying around if —"

"Got it."

"Felicity!"

"Dig!" The sounds on Dig's end were more vicious, and craning her neck, Felicity saw that the police had formed a human barricade of linked arms, semi-circling the still-wide berth between the angry protesters and the leader.

"It's not holding! We need another way. Can't you set off an alarm or something?"

"I'm on the police frequency," she said, tapping rapidly. "They're sending more backup, four minutes out."

"Not good enough! Mobago's not —" a scuffle, and Felicity lost Diggle.

"Dig!" Roy's breath caught.
Felicity started to walk. "I'll find him — you keep watching for Oliver —"

"You'll be crushed. Let me do it — I think I saw him somewhere…" Roy's breathing quickened, as if he was running, but Felicity was already pulling up the rooftop surveillance again, all the while counting the seconds in her head, the agonizing four minutes before it would all be over.

Felicity wished she had the sonic device Sara used to incapacitate targets, but the League must have reclaimed it before she got back to Starling. And she couldn't replicate it on the Tablet speakers, not loud enough to matter.

"He's coming out!" Dig shouted hoarsely.

Too many things happening at once. The police line straining against public fury. The brief flash of a navy blue suit and a dark head, disappearing into a massive black car. Why wasn't he taking off?

"The engine," she cursed. Of all the things to go wrong —? The League must have sabotaged it, or maybe it really was fate trying to end things for Mr. Mobago, but he'd have to move to the identical backup car, and that was another few seconds of danger. The car doors flashed as they opened, and the police line finally crumpled under the strain of resisting a mob, like a line of paper dolls —

A flicker of movement in the corner camera caught her eye. Felicity yanked the image into focus — a dark blur darting from one guard to the other — three down in seconds. She'd worked with him for two years, seen him fight from every conceivable angle, with every conceivable weapon. She'd have picked him out in a moving army. The way he yanked one of the guard's legs out from under him with a wire, the crouch he rose from after all of them were down, lithe as a jungle cat — it was Oliver. That sudden stillness, the unnatural straight stance of a string pulled taut, ready to fire —

"Oliver," Felicity breathed. Her sniper program was up and running the calculation, and she was running, skidding into the position that would put her in his sight line. There, she raised the rim of her umbrella high above her head, rain be damned, and let him see her defiant glare, arms thrown open as if to be a human shield between his arrow and Mobago. As her hair and clothes darkened with wet, she sucked air into her lungs, knowing that he wouldn't be able to hear her over the commotion, even if she shouted, but if there was even the slightest chance that he could…

"OLIVER!" she shouted, putting all the frustration, all the fear that he'd lost himself, all the inexplicable love she still had for him — all in that single word. His name.

Then softly, to herself and the ghost she conjured up in her mind, "Oliver, don't."

For those precious few seconds, Felicity couldn't breathe. She was waiting for the arrow to fly, the demise of his humanity, and the little death in her heart. The rain had fogged up her glasses, making it impossible to see whether there was someone on the roof, but she knew that the danger had passed when tires screeched out of the vicinity and the crowd shouted angrily.


The rain…it was startling. It was cold. Felicity reached up with numb hands to brush her wet cheeks, close her open coat. She'd lost a button somewhere, and her hair was clinging to her shoulders like damp straw. She released the pent-up breath of relief, and it hurt to realize that she honestly believed Oliver would have shot.

She reached up and opened the comm link. "We're okay," she said to Roy and Diggle, her voice fraying in a dozen distorted echoes of a broken heart broken all over again. "We're okay," she said again, this time as if she'd meant it.
"Big Belly tastes weird here. Not," Felicity swallowed her bite of Bellybuster (extra pickles) "that I'm complaining. I like that they have curly fries."

"Not. Helping." Roy sounded like he was trying not to die of hunger.

Diggle's chuckle, fraying over the comm link, made her smile. But she took pity on Roy and decided to give him a light at the end of the tunnel.

"Lucky for you — it gets dark at 4:30 here," she said, pulling up weather projections in the sidebar while keeping an eye on the surveillance inside the club. "Just stick it out for half an hour and they'll be heading home."

Mobago and his goons, while seedy in the worst way, seemed to be terrified of the dark and were always back in their triple-secured diplomatic hotel by the time the sun disappeared from the sky. London winters meant that it was as dark as midnight by 5PM, latest.

"Try bartending for people with Russian accents. I can't understand them," Roy muttered, and Felicity pictured him viciously polishing a glass while glaring at the rest of the club.

"What about you, Dig? Any complaints?"

"Apart from the fact that Mobago seems to be having the time of his life with taxpayer dollars, I'm good."

"I know, right?" Felicity studied the surveillance feed in his private room. "You'd think an angry mob would have rained on his parade."

With a sigh, Felicity muted her line and sank lower in the car seat, chewing on a curly fry. As usual, she wasn't invited to the undercover gig. Diggle and Roy had agreed on the singular point that she was too clumsy to pass off as a waitress, or any kind of dancer inside The Queen's Head, the exclusive private club for elite politicians and bankers. Dig and Roy had been "working" there for the past week, and were going to as long as Mobago kept coming. She'd hacked the correspondence and found out his departure had been bumped up to the next day because of the riots. Just one more day and they could head back home to Starling.

Or would they? Felicity hadn't really considered the whole picture. They'd been so uncertain of Oliver's presence in London that they hadn't really talked about the possibility that he actually was. Were they going to kidnap him? How? Felicity didn't need to ask what Dig and Roy would do for Oliver Queen, but what they'd do against him, she didn't know.

Felicity shifted her feet from their place on the dash, chewing glumly. It'd been easier trying to bag Roy when he was Mirakuru-ed, because at least they knew the normal Roy would have wanted them to stop him from hurting anyone else. But Oliver — Ra's al Ghul's arrow — he'd probably fight them if they tried to bring him in. Savagely — in an attempt to stop them from reversing his sacrifice.

"My turn," she said, firmly. "My sacrifice."

The Arrow's fury for Oliver's humanity. It was worth it.

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Diggle never let himself feel the fatigue, ignored the stiffness in his shoulders, the crick in his neck,
the fact that he was a father and not a twenty-year-old recruit in the US Armed forces. But the week had taken its toll. The last thing he needed after dealing with a violent mob was to hand out drinks in a seedy club with cigarette smoke burning a hole in his sinuses.

He settled into the driver's seat with an involuntary grunt, and reached for the steering wheel that was on the wrong side of the car. Behind him, Roy clambered into the backseat, awkwardly shifting limbs inside the boxy Mini Cooper rental.

"Coffee," Felicity said, holding out a thermos. She didn't need to ask.

Diggle wanted the coffee, but he'd seen the circles under Roy's eyes, and shook his head. "Let Roy have some."

Felicity smiled and lowered her voice, "He's already asleep."

Diggle glanced around. Roy had drooped in the backseat, his chin resting on his chest and arms loose and prone by his sides. Felicity grinned at Roy the way Lyla's face broke into a smile at baby Sara's laugh. Warmed by the thought of his wife and kid, Diggle took the coffee and gulped it black and steaming hot.

"Better?" Felicity screwed the cap back on the thermos and buckled up.

Diggle nodded, and started the car. "Better."

They talked softly through the drive, Felicity occasionally breaking off to give him directions back to their hotel, a QC-corporate four-star within a few streets of Mobago's. Otherwise, it was like a regular day, when Diggle would swing by QC to pick her up after work. Felicity had a tendency for unfiltered speech, especially in prolonged silences, and that was how he'd found out more than he ever wanted to know about Ray Palmer, her new job and the goings-on in Central City.

"He called me, again," she said, her face turned towards the window. Deliberate or just chance, Diggle didn't know. There was something curiously flat about her voice, like it'd been pressed smooth of any wrinkles, like a shirt she'd wear to work. She sounded dreamily half-asleep, one painted fingernail tracing patterns on the glass.

"Palmer?" Diggle asked.

"Mm-hm."

"What about?"

"He has a new idea — a thermonuclear generator with reinforced fission sub-systems — anyway, he wants my input as soon as I get back to Starling, whenever that is."

Diggle wasn't a scientist, so he knew that Felicity wasn't looking for his input on Palmer's unintelligible — but probably brilliant — idea. She wasn't sure about Starling, about her job, maybe even about Palmer.

"You know, whatever happens next, I'm pretty sure Palmer values you for you."

"I know," she said, quietly. Guiltily.

Diggle had watched Felicity and Oliver draw closer in the darkness of mutual obliviousness, struggle to put a name to whatever it was they were feeling and settle for the nameless gestures — the wordless looks, the touches on shoulders, brushed cheeks…the confession, the death, the fallout.
Nobody could say that Oliver and Felicity had the easy road, and nothing would have made him happier to see the road in front of them be straight and simple. But some loves were harder to get right the first time — like him and Lyla. Some loves burned bright and sudden, then vanished into the void, doomed to be short-lived. Felicity's unwavering loyalty, Oliver's tendency towards guilt and self-sacrifice…it was an ominous combination even to someone who'd had his fair share of unlucky relationships.

But watching the way Oliver smiled at Felicity, to hear him admit that he didn't want to die alone in the Foundry as The Arrow…to see Felicity's fierce opposition to the idea that Oliver Queen could slip into the void without some kind of resolution…maybe there was hope after all. Maybe the League's Arrow would see his humanity in one woman. Maybe he already did. Maybe Mobago still walked alive because Oliver Queen still existed beneath the hood and couldn't bear to have Felicity witness his death.

"Funny how Ray Palmer and Oliver Queen are total opposites in everything but their attraction to a certain genius," he said, and when there was no reply, he found Felicity curled up in her seat, fast asleep.

A bag of Indian takeout swung from one hand as he fumbled in his pocket for his room key. Roy and Felicity were still at the restaurant, but he'd come up first to call Lyla. Diggle dug it out from the loose change in his jacket pocket and elbowed his way gratefully into the relaxing darkness of his hotel room.

The balcony door was open.

Diggle's hand closed around the taser in his back pocket and he swung around to face the intruder.

"Don't move." His other hand felt for the lights. "Or I'll shoot." As if to demonstrate his point, an arc of bright blue electricity danced between the two electrodes on the very live taser in his hand.

Then the lights came on, and Diggle saw who was standing in the corner. Hooded in black leather, arms stiffly by his sides, his bow in one hand.

His heart skipped a beat. "My God, Oliver. Did the League send you to take me out?"

"I'm not here on League business," said Oliver, with a voice that could cut glass. It reminded Diggle of Felicity's voice when she was pretending. Unnaturally flat, as if someone had forcibly ironed out all the wrinkles of normal human speech. For the millionth time, Diggle wondered what the League had done to him in one year.

"What are you here for, then?" Diggle said, without lowering the taser.

"I want you to convince the others to go back to Starling City. Tonight."

"You know I can't do that, Oliver."

"Then you will be interfering in League business. And the League will have to deal with you too."

"I don't think you have it in you to kill all three of us. And what could I possibly make up that would convince Roy to leave his mentor? What could I possibly make up that Felicity — your Felicity — won't see right through?"

Oliver's jaw remained stubbornly set. "You'll think of something. You have friends in ARGUS — have them make up a report."
Diggle took a steady step forward, moving his hand off from the switches, to his back pocket — his phone. "Why would I give up on you, Oliver?"

He knew who his last call was, and he pressed redial. Waited. Because she was never far away from her phone.

"Because you still care about Oliver Queen. About his Team. His legacy. You'd do anything for him, wouldn't you?"

"You know it really creeps me out when you refer to yourself in third person."

Oliver didn't say anything. The phone shivered in Diggle's hand, from the sound he was too far away to hear, as if someone was talking on the other line.

"Oliver — listen to me — come back with us to Starling. It's not too late. If you're afraid the League will find you, we can hide you so they'll never know where to look. Or we'll fight with you, us against the League, against Ra's al Ghul."

Oliver's head jerked sharply to the side, as if he'd been punched. "You can't defeat the Demon," he said dully, as though it was an exhausted concept. "You either convince them to return to Starling and stop interfering, or Ra's will be given a reason to return to Starling. For you. For Lyla. Your daughter. For Roy. For her. If you save Mobago, you make yourselves enemies of the League."

"You mean we'll be wasting the sacrifice you made?" Diggle said, fiercely. "We never asked you to. We would have found another way, because we always do. We want you back, Oliver, and we're not letting you sacrifice your humanity and your last chance at a life outside the League of Assassins for one mass-murdering maniac with a vision."

"Someone once said I was the crazy one with the vision. Ra's is the same."

"You," said Diggle, "are not Malcom Merlyn. You are not Ra's al Ghul." He pushed as close to Oliver as he could, with only twelve feet left between them. "Listen to me, Oliver, if you kill Mobago, there's no going back. You'll go on the list, with Lee Harvey Oswald, John Wilkes Booth — they were hunted. They were caught and they died without their freedom. They may have killed good men, but even if you kill a bad guy like Mobago it still makes you a killer — the killer I thought you didn't want to be, not after Tommy died."

Oliver's head cocked slightly to the side, as if he was studying his old friend with derision, as if having Diggle this close with a live weapon didn't worry him in the least.

"This is your last chance, or what comes next will be retaliation. I won't hold back just because you happen to be standing in the way."

"All right, Oliver," Diggle said, but didn't lower his weapon. "But what about Felicity? Is that what stopped you from shooting Mobago today? Because the demon Ra's al Ghul planted inside of you still knows what your humanity looks like? Because Felicity Smoak reminds you of who you still are?"

"Felicity doesn't matter," Oliver snapped, but the bristle of emotion was enough to make Diggle feel the first stirrings of true hope. "I — don't — matter." He'd gritted his teeth, as if he was fighting something inside of him.

Diggle heard the scuffle outside the door, like the scratching of a cat trying to get in. "You sure about that?" he said, with a smile, as the door swung inward and Felicity Smoak fell into the room.
"Oliver!" Felicity grabbed onto Roy and awkwardly climbed back upright. She felt like the ground was spinning under her feet, from the unbelievable relief that it had been him after all, on that rooftop.

Now she took a shaky step forward, touching Diggle on the arm and holding out her hand to Oliver. "Come back with us. Oliver. Oliver?"

His fingers were tight on his bow, the leather in his gloves protesting against the crushing grip. The vein in his throat beat a steady staccato under a fresh scar there, just beneath the shadow of his jaw.

"What happened to you?" Felicity asked, faltering for once. New scars. His distance. He was becoming someone else, he was lost on another island.

"Go back to Starling." It was an order.

"No," Roy said, his throat working from the effort, to control himself. Felicity touched his arm, as though she could calm his explosive temper. He took after Oliver there. When someone wasn't making any sense, they both had the tendency to blow up, and Roy was very close.

"I don't need to be found," said Oliver, brutally cold. "Go back to Starling tonight. Or —"

"We're not just gonna leave you!" Roy snapped, and would have lunged for him if Diggle hadn't pulled him back. "Do you have any idea how long we've been looking for you? The second you left the Team, we pulled ourselves together and went after you. And now that you're in front of us, you just expect us to give up?"

Silence. Then Oliver raised his bow — or he was about to, but Felicity darted directly in front of him. Her hands were wide open, held up in front of her. One step. Another. Until she could hear the breath entering and leaving his lungs.

"Oliver." No response, as though the name didn't belong to him. "Oliver Queen," she said fiercely, stalking close to him until she could almost see beneath the hood. "Do not even try to pull a fast one on Team Arrow. Because I will taser your leather ass and drag you back to Starling City and the Foundry if I have to. But I probably won't, because Dig's right here and he's been doing a lot of lifting, and Roy's taken over your salmon ladder, so your weight shouldn't be a problem — look, the point is —" She tentatively lowered her raised hands onto Oliver's immobile shoulders, feeling the warmth of rushing blood through the leather, the firm realness of his flesh and muscle. Not a dream, not an illusion. This was not Oliver Queen's ghost. "The point is — I won't ever stop trying to save your soul. So don't even try to make me change my mind."

The hood shifted, and suddenly she was looking up at his face, at the telltale flash of bright blue she remembered.

"Hey," she breathed, in a very different voice. Her fingertips reached up to brush his cheek, they briefly caught in his beard, rasping against her skin —

There was suddenly only air in front of her as Oliver tore himself away, disappeared through the curtain and out into the balcony. She heard the shot of a wired arrow leaving his bow and the metal cable pulled taut as he disappeared into the night. He was a vague shadow disappearing across the rooftops as she leaned over the railing, and the frigid night air reassured her that it wasn't a dream. That she'd somehow gotten to Oliver Queen.
Felicity woke up startled, clawed at the air until she flailed free of the blankets and landed face-first on the carpet with a "gargh!".

Diggle and Roy were drinking coffee by the balcony. Roy snorted, and buried the noise in his coffee mug, while Diggle held up a fresh cup of coffee like he was dangling a treat.

"Okay," she said, kicking her way out of the tangle, groping for her glasses on the bedside table. "Whose bright idea was it to wrap me in a burrito?"

"You crashed pretty hard after — " Roy glanced at Diggle, as though for approval.

"—after Oliver left," Diggle finished for him.

They both turned towards her with identical expressions of concern.

"Oh," said Felicity, looking down at herself. She was still wearing her clothes from the night before. "Right."

The grogginess was wearing off, and as she surveyed the general mess that was their single, shared hotel room, she began to remember. Diggle and Roy's room was ruled off limits after the break-in, so they'd all moved into Felicity's room for the scary plotting.

Felicity clambered to her feet and padded over barefoot to get her cup of coffee from Diggle, carefully avoiding their eyes. The plan was still fresh in her head, like ink still shiny from a pen. Three syringes. A city grid. The getaway car and the decoy. A lot of hacking.

And Oliver.

"And how do we feel about today?" Diggle asked her, gently.

Felicity chewed her lip and nodded. "Good."

She looked at Diggle and Roy, holding the three of them in a wordless pact. Then they started to move.

"Take a left," Felicity said, turning the tablet one-handedly so she could see the map better. "Come out on the second exit and you should be at the pass."

Tires screeched as Diggle hit the gas. "Roger."

"You know, it's really confusing when you're talking directions to us both," Roy said, white-faced in the driver's seat.

"Well tough, unless you want Dig to drive off Waterloo bridge."

Roy rolled his eyes, which was pretty funny since he was in red leather from the neck down, but his mask was still under his chin like a pair of aviators. It made Felicity want her own mask. But the eyeholes on those things never seemed to line up for her. Baby steps. Maybe a nice black jumpsuit.

Roy winced as a car swerved past them, honking. "It's weird, okay? I'm not used to driving on this side of the road. We should have gotten a motorbike."
"I think even normal bikes have a chance of outrunning you, Roy," she said, tracking the confusing trio of colored dots, two close together, the other coming from another direction. "But we're good. Mobago's just two cars ahead. When he takes the road less travelled — less travelled because it's technically a dead end — we follow."

"In position," said Diggle. "Any sign of Oliver?"

"Good. Stay put, ETA three minutes. And not yet, but he'll be here," Felicity said, tapping the tablet screen.

Once Mobago reached the airport he'd go through the diplomat route and that meant triple security. Since his car was insanely fortified, the best place to do it was a detour, a road accident of some kind that would draw them through an ambush. A one-man ambush, by Oliver's standards, but Felicity knew how to beat that.

Hack the car's GPS. Stupid, Oliver Queen was not, but in terms of hacking, Felicity could run digital marathon-circles around him. He spoke in arrows of deadly accuracy and weird twisty jujitsu moves. Felicity spoke in coding and booby-traps sprung by dint of an internet connection. While Mobago's driver thought he was heading his boss to the airport, Felicity was sending them through a series of detours that took them further into the city, and if all went according to plan (or the driver kept being stupid), they'd be funneling through an electronically-gated underpass in three — two —

"Bingo," Felicity said, and slammed onto the locks with a triumphant grin.

Ahead of them, far down the empty stretch of road — they heard a gigantic crash. Roy hit the gas and sped them into the yawning darkness, and Felicity closed the gates behind them, returning the underpass to its previous state of under-refurbishment.

A small fire blazed merrily around the smoking pile of hubcaps and misshapen metal that had fallen off the front of Mobago's car. Diggle had spun the truck around so the side hit Mobago's car head on, effectively completing a makeshift roadblock.

Roy stopped just shy of the bumper of Mobago’s car and yanked the mask onto his face. Felicity tossed him the bow and quiver from the back seat, but he stuck his head back into the car. "You sure about this?" he said, his blue eyes and concern reminding her of someone else.

Felicity elbowed her door open and shouted, "Keep your earpiece in. Now go!"

Roy didn't need to be told twice. He sprinted for the car, while Felicity ran to the dented truck to find Diggle. She found him kicking his way out of the smoking truck, a small cut bleeding on his temple.

"You okay?" she asked.

He nodded, reaching for the gun in his belt. "Roy?"

"He's getting them to the tunnels." Felicity tapped her earpiece. "Roy!"

"I have them," he said, sounding out of breath. "One of them hit his head, argh —!" Roy broke off to say a bad word. "He's heavy," he added, as if in elaboration.

Diggle was already racing to help him. Felicity followed, plugging her tablet into the electronic access pad that kept the cast-iron door locked. It blinked three times and swung inward to a dimly-lit corridor, releasing also a smell that made Felicity's eyes water.

She wrinkled her nose. "Okay, that one's on me," she said. "I hope that's not methane, or you guys
could get blown sky-high —"

"Not. Helping." Roy grunted. He and another of Mobago's security team had a particularly fat man between them, another three behind him and Diggle bringing up the rear.

One of the three stumbled into Felicity, grabbing her wrist for support. She yelped, jerking away in reflex. He was diminutive in stature, something she wouldn't have guessed from his pictures in the news. Close-cropped dark hair, chocolate-brown skin that cracked around the eyes. A ghoulish smile parted his lips, showing a mouth as red as blood. "Your friend," he began, in perfectly-accented English, "tells me that you want to save my life."

**Mobago.** Felicity tamped down the shudder of revulsion and reminded herself what they were here to do. His grip felt unnaturally dry and hot on her skin, like a desert wind.

"We took out the people who cornered you," said Diggle, straight-faced. "Follow him—he'll take you to a safe exit."

Mobago's men muttered among themselves in a language she didn't understand, while Mobago's slightly yellow eyes traveled to the gun in Diggle's hand, then back to his face. He turned his eyes on each of them—Roy, Felicity. And smiled again. "Why, thank you," he said, and Felicity knew he didn't believe them at all.

But she didn't have the time nor the patience for it. Her tablet buzzed—the surveillance alarm. He was closing in. Very slowly, she extricated her wrist from his arid grasp and stood up straight.

"If you leave now, you can beat the traffic for Heathrow," she said. "International check-in's murder."

Diggle concurred, drawing himself up to his full height. "You don't want to miss your flight, do you, Mr. Mobago?"

Mobago, to his credit, could handle panic like a pro. He merely inclined his head graciously and gestured theatrically to Roy, who looked like he wanted to roll his eyes. But he settled instead for losing the sack of potatoes between him and another guy. "Here, take him," said Roy, hoisting Mr. Sack back to his friends. He nodded briefly at Felicity and ducked into the tunnel, followed closely by the others.

The door creaked shut behind them and shut with a resounding crash that startled Felicity into alarm-mode. She made sure the door was locked, and ducked behind the ruins of Mobago's car with Diggle to prepare for the inevitable showdown.

Felicity swiped to bring up the footage. It showed a lone motorbike tearing down the road towards them. As she watched, the rider brought it to a stop just a few feet from the door. The fact that the fence was locked seemed to make no difference to him. He raised his bow and stood very still.

Felicity reached immediately for Diggle, her fingers digging into his sleeve as she braced herself for the attack.

The screen flared pure white as the sound of exploding metal reached their hiding place. A chunk of chain-link fence bounced harmlessly past the car, and Felicity instinctively reached into her pocket to make sure that the weapon was there.

Diggle squeezed Felicity's shoulder and released the safety on his handgun. He was peering past her, into the clouds of gray smoke billowing across the entrance.

*Be careful,* she mouthed at him. He nodded and rose smoothly from behind the car. He'd only taken
two steps forward when something whizzed out of the mist and caught him in the shoulder. Diggle went sprawling with a curse, his gun skittering into the shadows.

"Dig!" Felicity went immediately to him, scanning his body for an injury. But it was dark, with only the flickering unreliability of smoke fires to see by. Diggle winced, pulling himself up into a sitting position with Felicity's help. His hand went to his shoulder, where there appeared to be a tear in his sleeve from a glancing arrow. "My gun," he said, hoarsely. Felicity started to look, but then she heard the unmistakable sound of a bowstring pulled taut.
Wake

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her head whipped round in a spray of gold, in time to see a figure emerge from the mist, hood pulled low over his face, the metallic glint of an arrowhead like the barrel of a gun.

"Oliver," Felicity said, shifting so that her body was between him and Dig. She wouldn't think of the door, the one that led to the tunnels, just a few feet away. Roy needed ten minutes to get Mobago through, ten minutes they had to fight for.

Felicity raised her hands in a gesture of placation, just then realizing that there were slick with Dig’s blood. She got clumsily to her feet, hands still raised towards him. One foot in front of the other, she stepped — for what felt like the thousandth time — between Oliver and a dear friend. The tip of his arrow was inches from her sternum, making the veins beneath her thin skin shiver with dread. But she kept very still, and kept her eyes unwaveringly on his face. She needed Oliver to see what he was doing, that he couldn't hurt Dig, Roy, or anybody.

"Tell me where he is," he said, very calmly, with nothing of the Oliver she knew. As though it was a sucky computer replication that’d forgotten about the emotional component of it.

Felicity shook her head and swallowed, to try and clear the taste of sawdust in her mouth. Oliver's hand twitched.

"Felicity — move!"

She ducked, and a gunshot roared above her head. She had to believe that Dig was aiming for Oliver's arm, but he wasn't there anymore. Dig was on his feet, gun arm raised — Oliver swung his bow like a quarterstaff and the gun flew out of sight. Before he could load another arrow, Dig threw himself at Oliver with a roar, knocking him to the floor with his weight. Oliver grunted, the hood falling back from his face, showing her the same ashy cropped head and blue eyes behind a black mask. His teeth were bared with fury, and Felicity looked away as Dig threw his arm back for a punch, because she had to make sure she had what she wanted in her pocket.

She was crouched there, watching helplessly as her two friends grappled viciously with each other. Diggle was bigger and stronger, but Oliver had years of training that the US Armed Forces had never seen, of the Parkour-Jungle-Thunderdome variety. He grabbed a metal dart out of his boot and hurled it at Diggle, who dodged away. Striking quick as a jungle snake, he swept Diggle's legs out from under him and lunged, twisting his arm under Diggle's jaw, locking him in for the struggle —

Felicity knew there were two kinds of neck holds, the kind that cut off breath and rendered the target unconscious, the other that snapped necks. She wasn't willing to wait to find out which one Oliver was using. Diggle's face was turning purple, the only thing stopping him from blacking out was the strength of his own fist, jammed between his throat and Oliver's steely hold.

"Stop it!" Felicity dived towards them, but a foot caught her around the ankle, made her land hard on her elbow. The pain shot up the joint and into her brain like a red-hot bolt, but she pushed herself up again, gasping.

"Where is he?" Oliver bellowed, making Felicity flinch. His face was red from the effort of restraining Diggle.
Diggle only choked hoarsely, his eyes bloodshot.

"Oliver! Stop —" She was almost blinded by the tears in her eyes, but she still reached for Oliver's hands. "It's okay, Dig. We'll let him go. Oliver, we're letting you go, okay?"

She felt the hesitation under her hands, and began to pull, gently disengaging his grip. She held his hands in her own, feeling the strength of his fingers, joints, and tendons beneath her softer grip. She'd felt these hands on her shoulder, on her cheeks, and knew how warm they could be, how comforting.

Oliver let her pull him to his feet, only looked down at her with a puzzled expression, as if he couldn't understand why she was doing it — crying or letting him go. With the hood down, she could see his face, her first real look in over a year. He was leaner, the bones in his throat more pronounced, the shadows under his eyes more noticeable. He was browner than she remembered, as though he had weathered dry sun and drier air where he'd been. The surface of his lips were cracked and chapped…

Felicity swallowed, turning her gaze to the tunnel entrance. "We sent Mobago through the tunnels over there. The route to the right." Her voice didn't sound like her, scraped raw from tears. She cleared her throat as Oliver followed her eyes to the door. "I told Roy to leave markers in case we had to follow him — you should be able to see them in the dark. That's all I know. Now just let me say goodbye, okay?"

Diggle pushed himself away, coughing the breath back into his lungs. Oliver only looked at him with detachment, motionless and unresponsive. But that was all she needed. The uncertain light flickered across his features, making him look as still as a statue. His eyes were as inky blue as bottle glass, the shadows thick and dark as the pit she'd dreamed he was in for the past year. They travelled slowly down the length of her upturned face — as though he trailed a finger down the side of her jaw and into her hair.

Felicity stepped into him, reaching for him with a muffled sob. She hugged him, hands clasped behind his neck, her face in his shoulder. She disengaged one hand, turning aside as if to wipe her face on her sleeve. But the tips of her fingers slipped into her pocket, moving the plastic barrel into her sleeve.

Three syringes, all in her pocket, warmed from the heat of her body. They each contained enough sedative to knock out someone of Oliver's height and weight, and then some. No chances taken, they would be taking Oliver Queen back to Starling, one way or another.

"I love you, Oliver," she said, turning to press her burning cheek to his.

_I love you._ One year ago, on a line frayed with static, the most intimate of confessions conveyed while they were separated by the length of a city. So soft that she thought she hadn't heard it right, and lost precious seconds asking him to say it again, clearer.

But when it dawned on her precisely what he'd said — without denials, without maybes — it'd been too late. She'd never gotten to say it back, because the line went dead on Oliver's suicide call before she could say it back to him. Because he'd been in too much of a hurry to sacrifice himself to wait for her to give him a reason to stay.

Oliver's breath caught, as though he'd been sleeping and just woke from a dream. Silently, the needle tip scraped against Felicity's palm, and she held him close, closer to her, as if she couldn't bear to let him go. She prayed for steady hands, as she raised her arm behind his back and sank the syringe into his neck.
Instantly, an iron grip caught her wrist and wrenched, forcing her back. It was a shot to the heart, seeing the way Oliver's eyes burned with betrayal — as he twisted the syringe from her hand, but he was too late. It clattered empty from his slackening hand, and he went down hard on one knee. Felicity rushed to catch him, and between her and Diggle, they guided him gently to the floor. She shifted so that his head was in her lap, and she nodded for Diggle to get the car while she waited with Oliver, stroking his face. His eyes were wide with uncharacteristic surprise, still trying to fight the descending dark, the murky haze of sedatives. His mouth opened, and she heard something.

"What?" she said, bending close to hear it again.

Silence. She pulled back as he subsided into the slow easy breaths of sleep. A tear landed on his cheek, glistened until she brushed it away with her thumb. When Diggle came back to get them, Felicity was crying silently, her chest shaking with sobs that they had him — that they finally had Oliver back.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, Felicity does get Oliver "back", and some people may have been hoping that he'd keep out of reach and Team Arrow would have to chase him all around the globe. But to be honest - I think that gets boring, because it's going to be long stretches of silence while Oliver goes back to the LOA to get his super-evil-orders and the Team are just waiting around for him to pop up. And I have a fairly weird idea about the rest of the story (how Roy, Dig and Felicity'll get included in this whole LOA thing) but just wait and see.

Anyway, it's not all going to be rosy and shipper-happy yet. Oliver probably won't be happy (in his very Oliver way) that she tried to save his ass by doing something he doesn't agree with, basically undermining his sacrifices, etc. Cue Epic Fights. Hence the quotation marks around "back", because who knows what the LOA did to Oliver while he was with them for a year?

Oh yeah, and the "I love you" may not be the most appropriate considering that Felicity hasn't ever said it back to Oliver, but the one time Oliver said "I love you", it involved deception and a syringe. I kind of think he deserves this reversal. Hope the show does have Felicity say it back at some point :\ or I will die over this winter break.

Also, if I neglect to mention characters like Thea (who should be concerned about her brother being missing) or the Central City guys, it's because I have no idea what the story's doing with them yet, so I plan to wait and see what the show is up to. (Like seriously though, I have no freaking clue what is going on with Thea, so as much as I want to write a scene for Thea and Roy, there's too much WTF WHAT WHAT WHAT for me to do that)

That's about it for my rant. Thanks for reading it, no hard feelings if you didn't. I look forward to writing Chapter 7.
"Is this…really necessary?"

Diggle turned at the sound of chains clinking. Oliver was awake and had fixed him with a glassy-dark stare, which was all he could manage, given the fact that they'd chained and strapped him securely to a bed, wrists and ankles. Diggle had frisked him for hidden weapons and swapped the black leather armor for harmless clothes meant for actual sleep. Now he adjusted the bed so Oliver was in a semi-reclined position, and returned to his seat at Felicity's desk.

"Even when Roy was on Mirakuru, he didn't have to be chained to a bed." Oliver's voice was pained, as though he was still fighting his way out of the nightmares. "You really went all out for me."

"I don't know, Oliver," he answered flatly, "but the last time I turned my back on you, you decided to make yourself a human sacrifice for the League of Assassins. This seems pretty appropriate for the situation."

Oliver rolled his eyes and let his head thump heavily onto the pillow. "It was the only way," he said quietly, and shut his eyes.

Diggle shook his head but said nothing. His role was Oliver's rationality, stepping in when he was close to rage. Roy was a reminder that Oliver was setting an example for his apprentice, the responsibility of that position. Felicity…Felicity was the only person Oliver might listen to now. The rational mind. The responsibility. The emotions, and with that — the conscience.

Diggle checked his watch. Felicity was still at work, and would be for another two hours. Making up for the time on "vacation" — and for the fact that they'd used an unconventional method of return, courtesy of a CEO named Ray Palmer.

An unconscious hooded and masked vigilante-turned-assassin would not have gotten through UK Immigration, so Felicity had called in a favor with Palmer. Private jet, private tarmac, no questions asked. Oliver never even stirred during the flight, not lucidly, anyway.

The trouble started about…an hour in. Thrashing, like a blind man trying to reach for light, vicious as a cornered animal trying to claw its way free of a net. Diggle and Roy had been forced to handcuff his legs as well, while Felicity watched with mute horror. Nothing changed once they got him back to the Foundry, made sure he was comfortable. The struggling fits continued.

It had long since occurred to them that they'd never seen Oliver sleep before, not since they'd joined the team, not even since he'd moved into the Foundry. Unconscious and nearly dead on a makeshift operating table, yes, but never under so deeply asleep that they couldn't wake him from the nightmares.

Two days in, Diggle finally told Felicity to go home. She had work in the morning, and looking dead on her feet after a supposedly restful vacation would only bring them more unanswerable questions. Roy and Diggle took turns keeping an eye on Oliver, until night brought Felicity back to the Foundry and the criminals out on the streets.

"Laurel came by," Diggle said, staring up at the ceiling as he prepared himself for a long recap of the year Oliver had been gone. "She's out on patrol with Roy every night. She said to give you a punch when you woke up — or better yet, call her so she can do it herself."
Oliver's eyes stayed closed, but Diggle had been listening to his breathing for three days, and knew what it sounded like when Oliver was asleep. He wasn't. He was just waiting, like a cat with its eyes closed and the rest of its senses watchful.

"Your company's doing well — but you probably knew that already. Sara's already walking, but the speaking still needs a little work. We think she's trying to say 'sky' but it keeps coming out weird. She's busy chewing on things for the moment, so we're leaving the necklace you gave her in the safety deposit box until she learns what 'choking hazard' means."

The corner of Oliver's mouth may have twitched, but Diggle couldn't be sure.

"Big Belly rolled out garlic cheese fries," he said. "That's probably the only thing worth talking about from the last year."

Oliver finally cracked a grudging smile. With a sigh, he turned his head on the pillow so that he faced Diggle head-on. "And you?" he asked, his expression back to its usual opacity.

"What can I say? We kept the Foundry going for you. You're not done crafting your legacy, Oliver. We're sorry if we got in the way of your decision to sacrifice the humanity you've built up for yourself, but we thought it's what you would have wanted."

"I told you," Oliver said, his teeth gritted. "It's not. Mobago wasn't my humanity, my humanity is —"

"— Felicity." Diggle moved his chair closer. "Oliver, that girl has a way of reminding you what your conscience would say, if you weren't so busy drowning it out with your sacrificial tendencies."

"It's my conscience that's telling me to leave Starling. I made a deal with the Demon. To serve in the League, or he'd raze Starling to the ground. Then all the good that we'd done — gone, because of me. I swore an oath to Ra's al Ghul that I'd serve him in exchange for your lives."

"Oliver, if Ra's al Ghul is anything like the stories, he won't care about one city. You really think his plans don't include Starling? That he'd make an adjustment just for you? And if he did — how many innocent lives would you have to take — on his orders — to reach that distinction?"

"What was I supposed to think?" Oliver snapped. "What was I supposed to do? He gave me two choices, I picked the one that spared the people I care about."

Diggle was taken aback by the ice in Oliver's glare, the new shards of broken glass he thought they'd pieced together over two years. These were new edges, new fractures. From yet another year of mystery in Oliver Queen's past.

"But you didn't, Oliver," Diggle said, gently. "Both options would have killed us anyway. Now we have a fighting chance, just believe in us."

"The thing Ra's taught me first," Oliver said, his voice low and hoarse, "was to not trust in hope."

He turned his head again and shut his eyes, and Diggle couldn't get a word out of him after that.
Felicity clunked downstairs into the Foundry, her feet aching from a full day in her heels. Ray could be like a kid with new toys, except the new toys were his ideas, and his ideas were 3D models of new technology that were seemingly scattered across Queen Consolidated, making her run around all day to keep up. In a way, she was glad that he was so busy; too busy to ask her about the private jet she'd borrowed to transport a drugged-up Oliver back home.

Halfway down the stairs, Diggle messaged to tell her that he was coming back with food (yes). She yelped when one of her heels went spinning into the dark, but rolled with it and pulled the other one off too. Her toes wriggling with the freedom, she walked barefoot into her workspace. The bottom desk drawer still had her fleece blanket from when she slept consecutive days in the Foundry. The pillow she used was under the head of a certain former CEO, but the bunny-printed blanket went over her tired shoulders.

It felt like college again, huddled under her blanket and checking the glowing screens of her computers. Felicity slid her glasses off her nose and massaged her closed eyes with the heels of her hand. She was tired, but then again, chronic tiredness came from balancing two jobs.

"Your shoe's under the bed."

Felicity slammed her hands onto the table in surprise. She swiveled in her chair, one hand holding her heart. "Watched pot never boils? You scared the crap out of me, Oliver."

His eyes glittered, blacker than she remembered. "Well I'd hardly say it wasn't deserved. You did stab me in the back with a syringe."

"Really?" she said, draping the blanket over the back of her chair. "The first time you told me you loved me — you put a syringe in my hand and told me to jam it into your ex-mentor's neck. Seems like it's becoming a tradition...for us."

The last part hovered between them in the stillness, turning slowly in the air like dust motes caught under a ray of light.

"For us," Oliver repeated, without any inflection. She couldn't tell whether he was being sarcastic, and snark was her thing.

Felicity ran a hand through her hair, avoiding his eyes. "I know there's no us...at the moment," she said, correcting herself. "But there was. For, like, two seconds."

"Never had much of a streak, did we?" He shifted, making the bed creak.

"No," she agreed, following with her eyes the new scars on his arms, his throat. "Are you going to tell me what they did to you?"

Silence. He raised his eyebrows.

"Did they give you split personalities? I mean — you've always been a little bipolar — but you let Mobago go the first time, then you almost kill Diggle, and when I tell you I love you...you don't even blink an eye...?"
"That's not true," Oliver said, too quickly. It was almost in reflex, and Felicity found herself remembering the little gasp in her ear, the sound Oliver made when she said those three words. Like she'd woken him from a trance. But she wasn't sure.

"Then why did you fight us? What did the League do to you? What did…Ra's…do to you?"

Oliver's eyes were wide and dark, but he turned away before she could see. Felicity looked down at her hands, spread flat on her knees. They balled suddenly into fists, and she was on her feet, throwing herself at the foot of the bed so she could make Oliver look her in the eye.

"What, Oliver, what?" she demanded. "You're back now, and we've told you over and over again that we'll fight with you — all of us, against Ra's, against the League of Assassins. Together."

Oliver opened his mouth wearily, but she talked over him. She knew what he was going to say. Ra's was all-powerful. Ra's was the Demon. He had an army of the most skilled killers in the world, and a grand vision to burn the world to the ground and begin from darkness. Fun stuff. But when had they ever faced an enemy with rainbows and glittering unicorns in their big evil plan?

"Why don't you believe us? We've faced Slade's steroid-jacked army, we've survived the Glades being turned to dust, and we'll survive this. Does everything we've been through mean so little to you that you can't even believe that?"

"I don't!" Oliver shouted back, his face twisted with frustration, an expression she'd seen countless times before – when he'd lost his temper. "You don't know what I've seen — what I've lived through — what goes on in Nanda Parbat! You don't know because that was the whole goddamn point! You weren't supposed to know, because I was going to keep you out of it!"

Felicity clapped her hands together sarcastically. "Oh, because I'm so weak that the truth would break me? Excuse me, Oliver, but you tried to keep me out of the whole crusade with the hands-down worst excuses I've ever heard — and I went to college with some of the worst rich-boy slackers in the country. I've stuck by you for two years — ex-girlfriends, explosions, psychopaths, and temper tantrums. Nothing you say or do scares me — Oliver, and even if it did, it's not enough to make me leave you behind!"

And on it went. They'd never fought like this before, because Felicity found herself using the arsenal of words she knew would pierce Oliver Queen's armor, and he returned it in full. She shouted across the length of the bed, while he strained against the chains that bound him to it. Years of working together meant that they knew how to push each other's buttons — and they weren't even a couple. God, that would have been a nuclear war to witness.

Felicity finally spun around in disgust, both hands fisted in her hair as she tried not to think about yanking his out by the roots. "So that's it, then?" she croaked, her voice raspy from yelling. "You want us to send you back to Nanda Parbat? Just like that?"

She turned back to him, radiating fury as a steady pulse.

"You're not even going to try and think of a way to shut Ra's al Ghul down? Because we will. Even if you go back, we may 'stop'" — she made air quotes with her hands — "trying to rescue you, but that's only because we're making Ra's al Ghul the priority. We'll shut him down and get you back. So even if you go, it's only a matter of time."

Felicity smoothed her wild hair down with both hands. She cleared her throat and fixed him with a steady blue gaze. "I told you that I wanted more out of life than waiting to die in the Foundry. I thought you did too. But this isn't sacrifice, Oliver – it's regression. You want to stay in the pit and
wait for your freedom to become a dream. Excuse me, but I'm going to be out here fighting for it, because you won't. Every second – every inch of it. It's on you to choose whether you want to fight for it too."

Oliver stared at her silently, half his face in shadow. He'd finally stopped struggling, but was sitting up, his back very straight and still. Holding his gaze for only a second more, she patted the sheets firmly, and turned to go, to cool off, to think —

She made it half across the room when he finally stirred.

"I thought of you — when I was in the pit," Oliver said, softly, without looking at her. Eyes closed, as though he was talking to himself. "When Ra's was trying to turn me. I thought of you — Diggle — Roy — I saw everybody I ever met and everyone who ever meant something to me. But I saw you the most…your face."

His features spasmed suddenly with pain, then eased, lapsing back into the curious flatness of emotional detachment.

"It was enough, to think of you and know that you were safe at home. That you'd carry on what I'd tried to do and failed. That at least when my world burned and I was in the pits of hell — you'd be safe in yours, because I'd separated it from mine."

"Oliver," Felicity said, in a very different voice. She hadn't moved, her hands still by her sides. His eyes flew open and held hers with unblinking intensity. "I sold my soul to the Demon for that promise. It's a promise I have to keep, or he'll burn us both alive."

"What if it's worth the risk?" Felicity asked, taking a step forward. She flinched a little from the sudden flare of stepping out under the ceiling light. She kept thinking back to Queen Mansion, when he'd tried to make her stay out of the battle, when she'd never asked — later — if he'd meant it. "What if I'm okay with that — as long as it means I'm with you?" she asked.

"Felicity," Oliver said, and she hoped.

Then —

"Don't burn with me."

She took a step back, her hands clenching into fists. Oliver subsided back into his pool of shadow, and she was alone again in the Foundry, contained within her solitary ring of light.

Chapter End Notes

It's weird how much I love writing fight scenes between Oliver and Felicity. I hope that they still fight even if (when) they become a couple in the show.

Anyway. Special guest next chapter. Already looking forward to writing it.
Blood Oath

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, so I'm updating again to make up for the lack of time next week. Special guest below. Must admit it's harder to write for Oliver's POV than it is for Felicity :-(

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A pair of coal-black eyes glittered from the shadowy rafters snaking across the ceiling. The whites of the eye were curiously little, as though most of it had been swallowed by the dark. Reflected in them was the shape of a man, laid flat on a table, his eyes closed as if in sleep, though his wrists and feet were lashed to the corners of the bed.

She waited, watched. Below, a woman swung abruptly away from the computers and took off running, snatching up her coat before she raced up the staircase.

Good. Her distraction seemed to be spinning its little toils around Oliver Queen's allies. The red one was slumped over in an alley somewhere, his large friend with him. The yellow-haired girl, she'd most likely gone to see why they weren't answering their communications.

Nyssa al Ghul dropped from the ceiling and landed without a sound, as she'd been trained from birth to do. Her robes billowing about her in a midnight cloud, she rose liquidly from her crouch and made her way towards the sleeping man. She trailed a fingertip across the chains, while her eyes glinted with savage amusement above the black scarf obscuring her jaw.

With a sigh, she pulled the scarf down to her chin and shook the hood back from her head. "Pleasant dreams?" she said, and smiled when Oliver Queen woke.

Oliver rarely let anything surprise him. He slept like a cat, ready to wake at a moment's notice — when he slept at all. During his time in Nanda Parbat, he associated darkness with rough scraping stone behind his back, and sleep he associated with his worst fears exerting their hold on his mind.

But to wake with Nyssa al Ghul's face hovering near his head — Oliver felt only resignation.

"I didn't break the oath," he said.

Her eyes, curiously large and almost completely black, glittered with amusement at his state of restraint. "Clearly," she said. "Your allies certainly resorted to some…unconventional methods." She laughed.

Oliver only glared at her icily. "Are you going to get me out?"

"Are you truly so eager to return to Nanda Prabat?" she asked, cocking her head. A black curl twisted free and spiraled down the side of her cheek, but she didn't notice.

"I honor my word. I promised to join the League, and I'm honoring my promise by returning."

"Surely your friends will see that differently. You said they were aware of your departure. Clearly that was a lie."
"I said I keep my promises," Oliver answered flatly. "I never said I wasn't a liar."

People were constantly telling him he was bad at it.

"Hm," said Nyssa, drawing her dagger with a soft *snick*. The perfectly honed edge sent a cold shiver down Oliver's spine, as did all League weapons with their mysterious darkness, but he kept his eyes trained on her face.

There were two ways he saw this going. One — she'd do what she tried to do to Sara, and kill her for breaking the oath. Two — she'd actually free him.

Based on the savage humor still burning behind her eyes, Oliver wasn't betting on the latter.

"I thought the League relaxed its policies on successful missions," he said, shifting slightly to accommodate a muscle that was aching in his shoulder. "Did Mobago —"

"Oh, I assumed something of that ilk occurred. You either decided to renege on your promise to my father — a death-courting mission, of course — or you were detained in some way. Either way…I saw no reason to allow Mobago his life. I expect his countrymen will keep the news quiet as long as they can." Her eyes skimmed the length of her dagger and flicked up to his face with the acuity of a drawn blade. "It was, after all, a terrible way to die. Being shot by arrows can be such a *slow* death without proper accuracy."

"You —" Oliver's mouth was suddenly dry.

"This is another favor you owe me, little arrow." Nyssa twirled the blade in one hand, a whirl of gold and steel. "Now you can return to my father with your head held high and the target removed from your unsuspecting back."

Oliver nodded. He was relieved, inexplicably relieved — for someone caught between two unhappy options. It was either the darkness, or the fire that came from not returning to the promised darkness. He'd gotten so used to the idea that it was them against the evils of the world — Diggle, Roy…Felicity — that being without them, his partners…was illogical. Incomplete. Until the League, where every facet of his identity had been scorched clean, purged and remade to fit the purpose of whatever Ra's al Ghul deemed it to be.

But Nyssa still didn't break the chains. She watched him with her unnerving black eyes, opaque as true darkness.

"Oliver Queen," she said. "How badly do you wish to be free of my father?"

He narrowed his eyes. The only reason she would ever ask — it had to be a trap.

"I swore an oath to him," Oliver said, carefully. "And you call yourself Heir to the Demon."

"That is true," she said, sitting on the edge of his bed. One foot swung idly back and forth. "But the hand sometimes gets tired of taking orders from the head. And as you Americans are fond of saying, *for the record*, I never had to swear an oath of fealty to my father. Blood — he thinks — is thicker than mere words."

"Not for you, though."

Nyssa exhaled slowly, and looked down at him with an inscrutable smile that didn't match her eyes. "My Sara — *my* love…" She took a breath and turned her back to him. "He will never tell me, but he has her blood on his hands."
"You don't know that." Oliver felt the old scars reignite at the thought of his friend, and turned aside.

She made a derisive noise at the back of her throat and glanced over her shoulder. "I know how my father re-educates his personal favorites. His lessons haven't taken as deep a hold as he thinks — if you remain unwilling to pass judgment on another. No," she said, snatching his chin roughly and turning his head back towards her. "I will decide what crimes my father is guilty for. He taught me well, you see."

"You can't kill your own father," he said.

She flung him away with thinly veiled contempt, sliding off the bed and pacing a small distance away, thinking. "The problem with me liberating you isn't the possibility that you'll speak a word of this to another living soul — no — I would kill you long before that happened, and you know I'd not hesitate. The problem, Oliver Queen, is your friends. They performed quite the feat in following your trail and subduing you."

Nyssa wrapped and unwrapped her gloved hands from the golden hilt of her dagger. "It would be easy for me to free you, but I don't doubt they'll come interfering with your future in the League. Now, I won't always be there to do your job for you — and if you fail to remove your targets again and again, my father will suspect something amiss. That for some inexplicable reason, you do not commit to his dreams of cleansing the world. Then he will kill you, and possibly your friends will try to avenge you — it truthfully does get very messy from there — should I continue?"

Oliver shook his head, stiffly, because he knew where she was trying to lead him. "You can't kill the Demon."

"Morally," she asked, "or in practice? Because neither pose a problem to me. Not if I have you to assist me."

"What could I possibly do?" he asked, through gritted teeth. "If I go back with you, my friends will still follow. Unless you plan to kill him in under forty-eight hours —"

"Leave that for me to worry about." She laughed at his expression. "Worry not, I promise not to harm your friends, or you may tell my father all of what you've heard. Now," she said, twisting her dagger. "Do you swear a blood oath to help me end my father's life?"

"I'm still in the middle of the last one I took," Oliver said dryly.

"Tell me, Oliver, do your friends know all that occurred in Nanda Prabat?" she asked, with a sly smile. "For instance, what it was like in the Pit?"

At his silence, she laughed. "I thought so. Now I presume the little yellow-haired one, the one who keeps vigil over your sleep — I presume you have an inclination towards her."

Oliver had never felt his helplessness more acutely, especially with Felicity apparent on Nyssa's radar. "Leave my friends out of this," he said, slowly.

"You and I should be better friends, Oliver. We both have a penchant for fiery women."

She laughed at his expression. "Shall I tell her? This...Felicity? Shall I tell her what my father did to scorch you clean?"

Oliver only looked at her, retreating behind the opacity of his stare, to the safety of his mind, a habit he'd developed acutely over the last few months. There was a reason why he never told Felicity or anyone else what happened in the League.
Because if he told them even a fraction of what he'd gone through — they'd never let him go back, and he had to believe that they would let him go.

Felicity. To leave her alone, to deny he felt anything for her, was the simplest and quickest way to make sure Nyssa never set her hands on Felicity. But it wasn't the easiest. It meant having to police his every thought, his every gesture, to keep himself from moving close to her, to share the space that she inhabited in the vast and dangerous world. To keep her safe was to leave her alone and admit that he was alone as well.

To lose her would be…unthinkable. And Nyssa knew this, from losing Sara.

It was the kind of pain that would ensure he bound himself to anyone, even Ra's al Ghul for an eternity, if it meant that whoever hurt Felicity would never close their eyes again.

When he opened his eyes again, he knew what to say. "Did you tell Sara everything your father did to you?" he asked, enunciating every word.

Nyssa's skin was bone-pale compared to the blazing dark of her eyes.

"Oliver Queen," she said, in a low voice. "I believe love has driven you insane."

"I don't care," he answered. "As long as you convince them not to follow me back."

Blood welled over the cut in his wrist, as Nyssa sliced through his skin and made sure he'd have the reminder of his promise.

"I swear that I will help you kill Ra's al Ghul, in exchange for the souls of my friends and Starling City."

"An oath in blood," she answered, and slammed the blade — still slick with his blood — into the lock. It broke apart and he wrenched his wrist free of the unwinding steel chains, as she did the other.

As soon as the last chain hit the ground, Oliver was on his feet, shaking the inertia from his limbs like stray droplets of water. He knew where they all hid things, in locked cabinets he still had the passcodes to, and within minutes he had his armor back, and his weapons. He threw off the clothes they'd put on him and dressed in his armor, phasing out the fact that he was being watched with amusement by his ex-girlfriend's ex-lover.

"I fail to see what captivates them so," she said, with a toss of her head.

He merely raised an eyebrow at her and continued to dress.

"Make your way back to the League, and I will follow. Mobago's blood is yours to claim — I had no involvement in his demise. Remember that."

Oliver nodded, and pulled the hood low over his eyes. But before he turned to go, Nyssa said something.

"If I knew that love was so dangerous," she said, in a whisper of Arabic. Her eyes glinted, because she knew as well as he did that it wasn't a League phrase. It was from an Arabic poem, one that Nyssa had recited to Oliver when he first came to the League.

Oliver had never been patient enough to read poetry, not in any of the four schools he'd dropped out of. But when he was losing his mind from Ra's al Ghul's teachings, Nyssa had put aside their
differences and accepted his debt, as if she sensed what it had taken for him to leave Starling. She’d taught him words to recite when he was in the pit, words to help him keep his sanity. The words of the poems were branded into his memory like scratches in stone, so Oliver knew the rest of it, enough to answer her.

*If I knew that love was so dangerous —*

"—*I would not have loved,*" he said, and with a final, inscrutable look, he melted into the shadows. His last glimpse of Nyssa before the door swung shut was her perfectly straight profile, perched on the edge of his bed, whispering to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, so the poem Nyssa's talking about is called *Letter From Under the Sea* by Nizar Qabbani. It goes like this:

If you are my friend...
Help me...to leave you
Or if you are my lover...
Help me...so I can be healed of you...
If I knew...
that the ocean is very deep...I would not have swam...
If I knew...how I would end,
I would not have began
I desire you...so teach me not to desire
teach me...
how to cut the roots of your love from the depths
teach me...
how tears may die in the eyes
and love may commit suicide
If you are prophet,
Cleanse me from this spell
Deliver me from this atheism...
Your love is like atheism...so purify me from this atheism
If you are strong...
Rescue me from this ocean
For I don't know how to swim
The blue waves...in your eyes
drag me...to the depths
blue...
blue...
nothing but the color blue
and I have no experience
in love...and no boat...
If I am dear to you
then take my hand
For I am filled with desire...from my
head to my feet
I am breathing under water!
I am drowning...
drowning...
drowning…

(From best-poems/nizar-qabbani/letter-from-under-the-sea/)

I just think it's a beautiful poem describing how much Oliver and Nyssa (maybe) both wish that they could have loved in simpler ways, that the consequences of their loves could have been less destructive to them. But in terms of Oliver and Felicity, I think it's Oliver's inner conflict basically. He wishes he didn't have to fear for her because he loves her. If he 'knew love was so dangerous', he 'would not have loved'. May be complete BS on my part (it's been a really long day), but it's a really beautiful poem (it may show up in later chapters, don't know).
"Holy…" Felicity jammed her fingers to Diggle's pulse, to make sure he was still breathing. He was still half-inside his car, slumped as though he'd been hit at the back of the head before he could get out completely. But from the strong beat under her fingers, she knew he was fine.

"Dig. Dig!"

She shook him, but he was out cold. Felicity whipped out the tablet for Roy's tracker. It was in his uniform, and out cold or not, it'd still ping his location…

…Twenty feet away. Felicity found him with a gigantic purple swelling under his chin from a very impressive kung-fu move, she assumed. She'd already called Laurel — who was on the other side of the city training with Ted Grant. They didn't know anything.

Felicity shoved the tablet under her arm and bent over Roy, tucking his arms in so she could drag him snag-free to the car, which was about the only way she could manage to move him.

"Too. Much. Salmon. Ladder." It was worse than dragging a ton of bricks, which in all fairness, could have been her fault. She'd been lapsing on the fitness routine lately, and her regular ten sit-ups a week really did make a difference.

Moving Diggle from the driver's seat was a little more complicated. It meant having to drag him all the way out of the car and then on top of Roy, who was squished into the backseat of Diggle's car.

"Can't do this," Felicity said, dropping Diggle's arms with a limp thud. "Whoops," she added, as he grunted unconsciously.

Time to call in some backup. Favor-friends to the rescue. What was the point of all that boxing if she couldn't lift two guys? While she waited for Laurel to pick up, Felicity opened up her tablet to check on Oliver. Her jaw dropped at the surveillance footage.

"Hello?"

"Problem," Felicity said, as the unmistakable figure of Nyssa al Ghul circled Oliver, who was still strapped to the bed. "Big, big problem."

Felicity burst into the Foundry, well aware that Oliver was long gone, but not in anything remotely resembling an accepting mood until she saw it for herself. But when she saw the depressions on the bed instead of Oliver, she wanted so badly to let her knees buckle and just — stop. After all this, the League had to come back for him. Just three days.

They'd failed. Again. Behind her, Laurel made a noise partway between a gasp and a curse, and
slammed her fist into a desk. The noise made Felicity jump, and focus on the silently amused figure of Ra's al Ghul's daughter.

"Nyssa al Ghul." She looked amused. "Heir to the —"

"Save it." Felicity had never been angrier. "You of all people know what makes people leave the League — and you can't even spare him some time —"

"I assure you, Felicity Smoak," said Nyssa, her voice cutting through the air between them, "that Oliver Queen left of his own accord."

"You mean after you threatened him," said Laurel, icily. "Like you threatened my sister."

Nyssa's eyes seemed to grow blacker by the second. Her chest rose and fell more sharply, but otherwise she was still serene. "I remember you," she said, tilting her head slightly to the side. "From Sara's grave. Laurel, correct? Laurel Lance. The jilted one. The damaged one. The one they couldn't fix."

"You forgot angry," Laurel snarled.

"Tell me," said Nyssa, with a gratuitously long stare at Laurel's legs, highlighted by the training outfit she was still wearing. "Have you learned to use your hips yet?"

Laurel looked like she was about to use another part of her anatomy, every hair on her head bristled with pent-up rage — at the woman she probably saw as the representation of everything that corrupted her sister's soul.

Felicity hurriedly held out her arm to stop Laurel, wiping her face with the other. "Why are you still here, Nyssa? You could have gone with Oliver."

"She's here to gloat," Laurel interrupted, attempting to brush Felicity aside. But she held firm, watching Nyssa with as much calm as she could manage. Oddly, Laurel being so angry was helping her find the kind of inappropriate-to-situation calm she often questioned in Oliver.

"No," said Nyssa. "I am not here to gloat. You could say I understand Oliver Queen's dilemma. Stay, and the League descends. Go, and his friends follow, entirely too loyal for their own good." Her eyes lingered on Felicity, making her shiver with wariness. "It seems to me that everyone would be best served if the Demon's Head was taken out with an arrow between the eyes."

Laurel, unlike Felicity, hadn't heard as much about the "Demon". Which basically disadvantaged her by about 0.5%, since Felicity basically knew nothing either. She didn't even have a photo from the super-villain database (and they kind of had one). "Ra's al Ghul?" said Laurel, in a voice dripping with suspicion. "You want to kill your own dad?"

Nyssa was playing with a scary-looking foot-long of a steel dagger, whirling it from one hand to the other like it was a toy to her. "One could say that I am of the belief that everyone's lives — including yours, and by extension, Oliver Queen's — would be infinitely better if my father was no longer on this earth."

"Why are you telling us this?" Laurel demanded.

Nyssa turned her eyes on Felicity, with an uncomfortable look of knowingness. "Because Oliver Queen needs to remain in the League in order to help me kill my father, a task he's pledged himself to complete. A task he can't complete with you all hounding for his return."
"Why Oliver?" Laurel's hard-edged voice hurt even Felicity's ears. "He's not even one of you."

Felicity swore Nyssa flinched when Laurel said *not one of you*, but whatever it'd been, it was gone too soon to tell.

"I have allies in the League, ones who will back me if I choose to stand against my father. But none are his favorites, not like Oliver. My father takes a unique pleasure in attempting to turn him, and only I can see that it hasn't worked."

"And you'll release him after he helps you?" Felicity asked. "Like Sara?"

Laurel turned to look at her in surprise. Felicity only knew that Sara had been released from her oath before, because Oliver had told her. Something that — based on Nyssa's unnervingly cold smile — was going to become important, even though she didn't know how.

"I will release him. But for that to happen, I need one more piece for my plan. And you will help me there."

Felicity turned away. "No." Then, louder. "No."

She pulled off her glasses and massaged her eyes. She was tired, so tired. There were two pinpricks of pain behind her eyes, drilling into her skull, and she just wanted to be alone under her blanket, away from Nyssa and the darkness she represented, away from Laurel — who she wasn't even officially friends with — and just close her eyes. Sleep out the night and wake up in the sun, to plan another way to get Oliver back to Starling.

Felicity replaced her glasses on her nose and took a deep breath. "Enough pieces. Enough of your super villain manipulation mojo. We don't need you to get Oliver back. And we're not going to help you break into some high-tech vault to get some weird funky weapon you think has mystical powers —"

"—You mistake me." Nyssa rose from her seat, striding towards them both. Felicity took an involuntary step back as Nyssa loomed in front of her, away from the spicy smell that seemed to radiate off Nyssa's robes, the arid scent of dusty wind. "The final piece I need is right in this room."

Chapter End Notes

Ha, I told you I had a really weird idea about the LoA and Team Arrow. Anyway, sorry if Laurel's written oddly, because to be honest, I pretty much always skip through her parts in the episodes. She's always angry in my head :\"
Hey guys, so the next few chapters are going to be Oliver's POV, because I went a bit overboard with imagining what Nanda Parbat looked like...and the super-assassin training...yeah so bear with me :D

Oliver crouched behind a jagged rock and observed the sprawl of dusty red stone below his vantage point. The entrance was an eroded stone facade, an intricate homage to bygone periods of religious splendor — a relic from when it had been the gates to an actual living city, instead of the underground Necropolis he knew it to be.

Today, it was an empty gateway into a mountain hollow, sealed to everyone except those who knew how to enter. Not that any locals would be venturing there any time soon, given the stories of shadowy arrows impaling trespassers and the ghosts of the monks who'd died guarding the city. Oliver had some notion of ghosts, his general belief being that ghosts only appeared when they were trying to tell him something. But the ruined city was not haunted by the dead.

It was haunted by the living specters in service of a Demon.

His first time there, he'd had to suppress the urge to attack as the dust beneath his feet rose in ghostly spirals, buffeted by the brutal Tibetan winds. He pulled a dark scarf over his nose and mouth and began to climb down the side of his hiding place, seeking handholds by force of habit instead of conscious choice. So much of the League's method was eliminating free choice and reducing them to their barest instincts, and it still unnerved Oliver to think that the League was exerting its effect on him.

But he'd have plenty of time to consider it later. He notched an arrow into his bow and stepped past the dust clouds that whirled past him like dervishes, passing through him as if they were the rumored phantoms. He drew an unconscious breath as the shadows descended in the form of an archway. Within a few steps, the patch of sunlight ended, and he progressed into total darkness.

Oliver's senses prickled, and as his eyes lost their use, his ears told him the direction the air flowed, his feet the erosion of the ground and where to step next, his nose the absence of sweat, and with it, the scent of an ambusher's fear. There was no living thing. But he wasn't alone.

The space was vast, and his imagination inevitably rushed to fill the void with hidden corners and open pits. A draft rushed up at him from below, and he sidestepped until the air became still again. A sideways sweep of his foot sent a shower of grit cascading down a yawning pit, just inches away from his position.

The air changed, turned razor-sharp with the taste of metal. Oliver twisted and fired in the direction of the sound. Metal met metal in a shower of sparks, and he threw his arm up as the misshapen shards of a deflected projectile skittered past him. Silence. They still weren't done. Ducked low, he moved further into the dark.

His heartbeat thumped loud in his ears, and Oliver knew that the frustration was intended. Frustration
Something whizzed across his chest. Oliver spun and fired off an arrow, but it cracked ineffectually against stone. He took another step forward, and this time the sound came from the other direction. He swung his bow out of instinct, parrying the projectile. This was the hardest part of League training, the one that actively required him to be both alert and give in to instinct. Oliver started to run, his feet tapping lightly against the stone. Arrows flew at him from the darkness, and he twisted and dodged, using both bow and limbs like his body was made from formless shadow. He paid no attention to grazes, or bare passes; he let the training take over and progressed swiftly across the terrain, until —

A fiery pit yawned into being. Without warning, the ground sloped away beneath him, and his body was skidding down nearly-vertical stone, across a ground without handholds. Oliver contorted and fired a grappling arrow into the yawning mouth above him. Somewhere in the murk, the arrow crunched on stone and the wire skittered to a stop, cutting his fall with an abrupt jerk. He swung towards the wall and banged his knee with a muffled groan.

He'd always hated this part. The pains of being member to an over-achieving killing organization. Oliver shook his head to clear it, craning his neck to find the entrance. Only after he'd swung into doorway did it occur to him that it was something Felicity might have said, and he smiled.

Two faceless guards in League robes awaited him on either side of a nail-studded door shaped like a gibbous moon. For the briefest of instants, he expected them to know about Nyssa's plan and kill him then and there. But it was only his paranoia from betrayal. Oliver pulled his hood back and identified himself, then pushed through the doors alone.

The heat from hundreds of burning torches fanned across his face, the kind of wet heat that came from the volcanic waters running below the city. It reminded him of the jungle, minus the open air and gaping expanse of ocean. He descended a set of crude stone steps hewn out of the mountain itself, just one of the many snaking entrances to the League's underground city.

The stairs ended on the city ramparts, a maze of dividers that partitioned the city into defensible sectors. Whether for the benefit of those who lived in the city or the benefit of those who controlled it, he didn't really know. Even though Oliver knew who he had to see first, he took his time, relishing his solitude — at least in theory — there were eyes all around, from Ra's al Ghul's rumored network of spies.

Below the walls, the city bustled with activity, because Nanda Parbat — while home to the League's army of assassins — was where members lived and died, started families and raised children, surrounded by the unforgiving training of war. Oliver turned his back on purpose, keeping Ra's al Ghul's looming residence behind him.

He knew wasn't alone anymore.

"What?" he asked, without turning from the sprawling city below him. There were children playing with fireworks on the lacquered roof tiles of a house. They were dressed like the Tibetan locals in loose shirts and trousers, except all in black.

"Ra's al Ghul summons you," said a singsong voice.

Oliver turned without a word and started walking, ignoring the pattering footsteps behind him. He knew that she could be soundless if she wanted to, and this was just to irritate him. Unfortunately,
while ignoring her worked at times, it didn't when she wanted something out of him.

He twisted aside as she somersaulted past him, landing in a crouch a few feet away, her long black braid curling around her feet like a tail. Instead of the standard League robes, she wore an oriental shirt like a dress, its length a tangible indicator that she wielded physical appeal as a weapon. She was built deceptively small, but when she rose from her landing, her long bare legs reminded him that they were very good at cracking whip-like across jaws and chests.

"Come now," said Cheshire, with a crafty grin. "I thought we were friends."

Chapter End Notes

FYI, Cheshire is a character from DC Comics. If you guys haven't seen Young Justice, you should. Cheshire is fricking cool in that show, super assassin and everything. Anyway, hope you enjoyed the chapter, apologies if Nanda Parbat wasn't how you imagined it. I really like the idea of an underground city for the League, but I know they're usually in a temple in the mountains. Whatever.
Oliver didn't even bother dignifying her claim with a response. He stepped past her and continued on the path to Ra's al Ghul's mansion.

"How was your excursion?" she asked, tripping along the ledge of the walls, arms held aloft like a balancing act. "Should I expect a midnight flight and a dawn execution?"

He ignored her.

"Oof," she pouted. "How boring. Did your job like a good boy, didn't you?"

"Good point," Oliver said, eyes still fixed on the road ahead. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"My mistress is Nyssa al Ghul," she sang, "and the Demon's heir has yet to return from her mysterious travels."

Oliver carefully skirted around the thought of Nyssa al Ghul taking out Mobago on his behalf. It was probably why Ra's wanted to see him — to see whether his first kill in service of the League had shaken him, whether he needed to be sent back into the pit.

"Your first time, wasn't it?" she whispered, clawing into his shoulders. "Did you bleed?"

Oliver shrugged. Her nails screeched off his armor as he bounded up the last few steps to the entrance. "Cheshire," said Oliver, pausing at the doorway. "Why don't you be a good pet and wait for your owner at the door?"

Then he closed the door on her smug grin.

Hooded guards shut the doors behind Oliver's back. He turned slowly to face the intricate gold-and-jet screen that dominated the room. Oliver walked towards it. He didn't look at the guards in the corners, or the vivid blood-red veins snaking across the marble at his feet, like they sustained the life of the demon that inhabited the room.

"Master," Oliver said, and sank onto his knees. The back of his neck shivered, as if an invisible blade lingered above it, waiting to drop at the first misstep. It was infernally hot, from the glowing braziers and the whitish steam rising from the spring behind the screen. Combined, they weighed oppressively over his senses and made his vision swim like he was on Vertigo.

Oliver kept his eyes down until he saw the black robes in front of his face, and the vague reflection of a man's face in the bloody marble. A soft touch on the crown of Oliver's head tilted it back, so he was forced to look full on into the Demon's face.

His hair and beard were both coal black and closely cropped like a General's. If he hadn't been wearing ornate black and gold robes, an Armed Forces uniform would have suited his hardened features just as well. But in his League robes, he looked like the undefeated King of his buried kingdom, defying death and clawing his way out of the pits of hell to rule on earth still. His eyes were the worst part — ageless, very like Nyssa's, large and black, but cold and void where she at
least hinted at her simmering rage.

"Tell me," said Ra's al Ghul. "How was world beyond?"

Oliver hadn't felt like a student since Lian Yu. The days of Slade calling him "kid" existed a lifetime away, buried in the memories of those five years in purgatory. But when he'd become the League's newest initiate, those days came rushing back. The unnatural knowingness in the Demon's stare would forever dwarf Oliver's experience, and they both knew it.

Long after Oliver finished his story, Ra's al Ghul still circled the room with his hands folded on the hilt of his sword. Like his daughter, he could be eerily silent, and Oliver — on his knees — could only think of an Alpha wolf circling the omega, waiting to pounce, or equally content not to, and just know that it was feared.

"How did it feel," said Ra's, "taking a murderer's life?"

Oliver stared at the pattern in the screen, the ambivalence coming as naturally as breathing to him. "Like justice," he said. "Like my first days as the Hood."

He wasn't lying.

The reflection continued to circle.

"Would you do it again?"

Oliver knew what Ra's would be looking for. Guilt. Revulsion. Signs that he wasn't ready to kill for the League.

He physically removed the thought of Nyssa's blood oath from his mind, and returned instead to a memory that suited the lie he needed to tell, a lie he'd considered extensively on his journey back.

_The Count, trailing his fingers through soft blonde hair, toying with the ponytail like it belonged to a doll. A young woman, trembling and bound to a chair, her eyes meeting Oliver's in silent warning._

_The sound of her crying, her face turned away._

_The sickening clarity of his vision as he trained an arrowhead on The Count's throat._

_The needle points grazing her neck._

"Oliver — don't — not for me —"

_Three arrows in quick succession, before he'd even realized it. The brief instant of knowing, knowing that he wasn't sorry. Not at all. The Count's eyes flung wide with shock, as he teetered through the window and fell to a second death._

_Kneeling beside her. Beneath his hand, her frantic pulse. Alive._

"Yes." Oliver said, and raised his eyes to the Demon's face.

Ra's smiled, but his eyes stayed as cold as the pit. Resting his hands on Oliver's shoulders, he raised him up and gestured towards the doors. "Come," he said, "walk with me."

Chapter End Notes
So that happened. No offence to the people who did the casting, but I'm still unconvinced by the dude playing Ra's on the show. I had a little trouble writing this part because I keep seeing Liam Neeson as Ra's instead of Matt Nable (dude on Arrow). Ah well. Also, I swear the Ra's al Ghul on Arrow had an Australian accent :-( (Yeah I know Slade had an NZ accent...)

Throwback to easily my favorite episode in Season 2 (besides the Barry Allen ones) - 2.07 was just beautiful. Anyway, yeah I figure if Oliver thinks about killing The Count when he lies to Ra's, it'll be pretty convincing. Cheers, guys. Will update ASAP. Nyssa coming up kinda soon.
Ghosts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oliver's breath stirred the dusty air. The tunnels had lost their chiseled smoothness, and were sloping upward, a climb that would end in a fall. He knew what was coming, knew it could only mean one thing — that Ra's didn't trust him.

Because he was being taken back to the pit.

"Initiates are food for the pit," Ra's said, not at all out of breath despite the steep climb. The gold in his robes caught the flickering torchlight, embroidered dragons slithering away into the folds of midnight silk. "You remember I told you once, that the earth holds a vast number of untapped wonders. A pit that grants your worst fears a physical form of their own is a wonder indeed."

"Everyone has their ghosts," Oliver agreed, and Ra's laughed, a sound that made the torches sputter momentarily.

"Your fears seem to be exclusively of the human kind," he said, and Oliver gritted his teeth against the memory of Ra's watching him from above as he dueled against the dead in his past, visible to nobody but him, fighting the realization that he was going crazy.

"I've always wondered if there was something about the pit's composition, the dust, for example, that flakes off the stone — or the sand — something alchemic, a compound that allows you to blur the limits of the Veil — to face the dead, to hear them speak back to you…"

Oliver knew how dangerous it was to believe that ghosts could speak, that they had a mind of their own, that they weren't resurrected in his consciousness and puppets to his unconscious will.

_The dead don't speak to me. They tell me what I already know, but haven't accepted._

"Ah," Ra's said, his exhalation a low shiver that carried across the vast cavern.

Oliver stopped beside him. There was only a single light source, a swaying black lantern with a heart that glowed hellfire red, like the light of a dying sun, just barely lighting the first few feet of rough wall down the sides of the central pit.

"Come," said Ra's, touching Oliver's shoulder. He guided him to the edge of the pit, where their feet scattered bits of grit that tumbled unseen into the yawning darkness.

Oliver turned to look at Ra's, every muscle tensed and ready for an attack. But Ra's only looked thoughtfully into the pit, tapping his fingers lightly on the hilt of his sword.

"The pit symbolizes human fear. The first stage of your training was to immerse you in the darkness of your soul, until you learned not to struggle with the darkness, but accept it. And you did. The first months, you refused to fight them. You were passive, you hoped it would just pass like a bad dream."

And he had. Oliver faced the phantoms, sometimes together, all trying to kill him. He shut down, because as soon as they had what they wanted, they'd go. Being attacked by ghosts wearing the faces of his friends and family was just a test by the League, to psychologically condition them against the familiar faces of their past. To teach them to recoil from the loves of their past lives, and
to instead trust the hand that pulled them out of the pit.

For months, Oliver let them kill him. He let them sear his brain with their rage and break his body using his own guilt as a weapon. Until he eventually began to forget their smiles and see instead their faces contorted with rage. Until he started to fight back and defeat his ghosts with his teeth bared in fury. When he first saw his friends after that year with the League, there'd been a part of him conditioned to see them as the ghostly apparitions in the pit, that they would only kill him like he killed them. Like he'd been trained to.

"Your fear gave way to rage. That will be your next step, as a blooded member of the League." Ra's turned to him with an unnerving smile. "But for today, I would like to know if your fears have changed."

The hairs on the back of Oliver's neck rose instinctively as the wind behind them picked up, building to a high, cold whistle that shrilled around the cavern like a ghost's scream.

He wondered if Ra's still meant to kill him, or did he mean for the pit to do it on his behalf? But precious seconds of hesitation would only make him look suspicious. Oliver knew there was no way out. He shed layers of his armor, leaving his bow behind. It would be too confined to use arrows in there, and the one thing they did provide him with, inside the pit, was weapons.

"Yes, master," Oliver said, and jumped.

Oliver closed his eyes to the darkness of the pit, scraping his bare back against the rough stone, his hands a mass of weeping cuts from feeling his way around the pit. It was configured like an old prison hole, rough walls leading down to a dusty well of volcanic sand and dirty shards of metal. No bones, because the pit devoured those too.

There was something in the air, a kind of powdery grit from the jet-black stone, like coal dust, that melted on his sweaty skin and disappeared into his system. The chemical substance that fascinated Ra's but terrified everyone else. There was no escaping it.

The formless gases rose around him like an agitated cloud of bees, and Oliver rested his head between his knees, waiting for the torture to begin. Maybe taking a life for the League would change what he saw — but he had no intention of finding out, just a morbid curiosity. He briefly wondered what story to tell Ra's — if he made it out again.

"Get up, kid." said Slade.

Oliver hefted the Bo staff, finding his footing on the uncertain ground. One hand on the stone at his back, the other holding out his weapon.

"You lied." Slade paced around his old student, scraping the wall with the tip of his sword, baiting him. His voice rasped with fury — the Slade he remembered. "About Shado. About yourself. About the blood on your hands."

The sword cleaved downward, and Oliver moved, staff meeting sword with a dull crunch. But when the sword withdrew, it wasn't Slade anymore, but Tommy. Oliver ignored the shiver of guilt.

"You said you'd honor me."

A chunk of wood split from the quarterstaff and sliced across the back of Oliver's hand. Slick with blood, his hand slipped, and Tommy tore the staff from him with a yell. Oliver ducked, and the blade clanged into the stone above his head. Oliver pitched his body forward and rolled across the razor-
edged floor. His hand closed on an uneven piece of metal, and he flung it like a throwing star.

It slammed into the far wall, because Tommy wasn't there anymore. Oliver's shoulder burned, and he reached behind to dislodge a jagged piece of shrapnel from his back.

The shadows behind him thickened.

"Remember me?" said Isabel, and he turned just in time for a blade to graze his ribs.

On it went. Oliver fought each of them, whether they were his mother or his father or his sister, whether they were Roy or Diggle or Slade or Shado. Sara and Laurel he fought together. But he refused to die at their hands because he knew they weren't real. There was blood on his hands, and some of the faces he saw had the right to claim it from him, but not like this. In his mind, he turned them to masked League assassins instead of his loved ones, the people he'd wronged and loved in his old life — the people he'd have a chance to love again.

The hope went off like a burst of sunlight, and Oliver fought with renewed strength, taking down the hordes of League assassins. His family burned bright in his head, bright as the stars in the sky. Oliver was triumphant, powered by the mastery of his own mind. He heard a sound behind him and whirled —

Only to find the one ghost he could never kill.

When she appeared in the pit, her hair was always loose, curling around her shoulders in waves of brown and gold. It made her look young, so young. Oliver dropped his weapon, let it roll across the floor and out of reach. Felicity, he thought, because he couldn't trust himself to say it out loud. He'd never told her, but for some reason, while his drugged brain made everyone else into enemies, the reason why he bore the pit was because it seemed to make an exception for her. And every time he sank into the darkness, she was the light at the end of the tunnel, the sign that it was over. The deceiving haze of the pit allowed him this one torture at least — to speak to her, to see her, to touch her…

Small stones skittered into the shadow, scattered by her feet as she moved towards him. She cupped his face in her small hands, and their mouths found each other in the dark. She was warm and soft and kind, because that had never changed about her, real or imagined.

Oliver breathed the Arabic as Nyssa had taught him, the closest thing to a prayer he allowed himself. It steadied him, helped him to keep her with him for a little longer…

"Oliver," she said suddenly, and tore herself away.

Cold air rushed into the void, and Oliver opened his eyes. She was backing away unsteadily, her hands crossed over her chest. There was something wrong with her eyes, the spark that kept the fire inside him alight — missing. It suddenly dawned on him — why.

With a gasp, her legs buckled. Oliver lunged forward and caught her as she fell into his arms, her hair falling thick and loose over his arm, still warm from her neck. He touched her face and came away with his fingertips sticky with her blood. Her arms slid off her torso, baring an angry wound where her heart should have been.

Every time Oliver tried to stop the bleeding, it surged from under his hands, until the body in his arms was as cold as the stone imprisoning him.

No. This wasn't how it worked. They never — they never lingered to die. She never died. He was supposed to die. It was supposed to be him.
"I'm sorry," Oliver said, but she was already gone.

With trembling hands, he closed her wide-open eyes, and held her in his arms. This was a new torture from the pit — as though it sensed his betrayal to the League, as though it sensed that he'd lost his fear of it. So it'd given him something to dread.

Above him, the wind arched into a high cold scream and rushed to be free of the mountain hollow, chilling the sweat on his back to ice.

Chapter End Notes

Cheesy, I know, but I couldn't resist ;)}
A goat bleated somewhere downstairs.

"You okay?" Roy handed Felicity a bunch of toilet paper, which she shoved under her nose to stop the bleeding. The dry Tibetan air was no joke, and the second she sneezed, it was like her Aunt Irma coming to visit, except it was all over her shirt.

"Apart from my remaining dignity being in fragile shreds, I think I'll live," she said nasally. "How are you supposed to hydrate the inside of your nose, anyway?"

Roy, helpfully, shrugged. "I'm doing fine," he said, shrugging in his ancient red hoodie.

"If you two are finished," said Nyssa, adjusting the dark scarf she'd looped around her head to hide her face. "We have a schedule to keep."

Then she loped down the staircase to keep moving their things into the safe house.

"I still don't see it," Roy said, eyes narrowed. "What Sara saw in her, I mean."

Felicity tilted her head back at the ceiling. "I kinda get it — the whole badass assassin thing just does it for some girls. And she's basically the princess of a whole kingdom of assassins, which is cool no matter how you say it. Sure, most girls just date the cute lacrosse player, but that kind of authority's pretty hot."

"You mean," said Roy, "like the CEO of a billion-dollar company who's also a crime-fighting vigilante trained in martial arts and archery? That's hot too?"

"Don't — even," Felicity blindly held up one finger, glaring at the ceiling. "When I find said crime-fighting vigilante, he's going to need a second funeral."

Diggle came through the door with a few more hiking packs, setting them down and cracking his shoulders. "How's she doing?" he asked.

"She," said Felicity, "is going to hemorrhage to death unless she gets a nose plug."

Diggle laughed. "No one's ever died of a nosebleed."

"Can we not — talk about death — please?" Roy was looking shiftily at the walls like there were camouflaged assassins waiting to jump him. "We're basically setting up camp an hour away from a few hundred trained killers. Does this seriously not bother any of you?"

"As it should," said Nyssa, returning with the last of the packs. She used her foot to yank the door shut, cutting off the sounds of the street. "But there's never anything wrong with some morbid amusement." She unwound the scarf from her neck, casting a dagger-like smile towards Roy.

Roy just rolled his eyes and shoved more toilet paper at Felicity.

"We've faced worse," Diggle said, squeezing Felicity's shoulder. She met his eyes and nodded.

"Okay," she said, with as much dignity she could scavenge (given the fact that there was toilet paper
plugging her nose), "here we go."

The packs were meant to disguise them as harmless visitors, and to hide Roy's weapons, Diggle's handguns, and Felicity's tech. There were bits of a satellite dish in the back of their van that were harder to explain, but helpfully, they had papers and translators stating that they were part of a QC-subsidized charity specializing in bringing Internet to the more remote parts of the world.

Diggle (through Lyla) had called in a few ex-ARGUS agents to round out the "charity" group, to act both as translators and to disguise the fact that Team Arrow was in Tibet. The idea was to have the satellite dish installed in the center of town so that Felicity could get some Internet access for the next part of what she was doing.

"Remind me again," said Roy, who had taken to poking holes in anything suggested by Nyssa, "why Felicity?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Felicity said, looking up from her laptop with a stung expression.

Roy was unapologetic. "The League is a League of assassins, right? I'm sorry, but in what world —?" He gestured at Felicity from the top-down, dusty lopsided glasses, messy ponytail and evidence of a dried nosebleed down her Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy T-shirt.

"I'm not going in as a member, right?" Felicity glanced at Nyssa, who just looked amused. "I'm going in as a servant — which I'm not crazy about, by the way, but it's my turn to go undercover."

"But why can't one of us go?" Roy said, unsticking himself from the wall. "Then we could pretend to be — uh…"

"—Initiates," Nyssa finished for him, and said, "and no. Some Initiates don't survive the training, and I'm in no mood to keep one eye out for a child when I have my plans to carry out. Felicity as my servant won't be questioned — because she won't leave my household, and even if she does, she's hardly the only blue-eyed yellow-haired outlander we have in the League." Roy started to interrupt her, but she silenced him with a jet-black glare. "And unless I send her to the kitchens, no one need know that she can't wield a knife."

"Ouch," Felicity said. "I can't cook, but ouch. Also — thank you for not mentioning that you need me to set up bugs all over Nanda Parbat so you can spy on your father, after which I am free to go. After face-kicking Oliver, I mean."

Nyssa turned a darkly challenging stare towards Roy and Diggle, as though daring them to object. "I do need Felicity."

Roy's jaw was working furiously. He was starting to remind Felicity of Oliver — and not necessarily in a good way. Oliver had his own issues, and she didn't need another miniature version running around, similarly trained in the deadly art of shooting pointy things at bad guys. And if Oliver at 30 could still behave like a hormonal teenager, a 24-year-old mini-Oliver was unthinkable.

"Sara survived the training," he said, and Felicity shut her eyes at the mental image of a landmine going off. "And she was a beginner."

A silence fell over the room. Even though Sara had come up between the three of them — Diggle, Roy and Felicity — no one had ever brought it up in front of her ex-girlfriend, not since she'd come to Starling for the funeral. Felicity quietly moved her laptop off her legs as Diggle, across the room, took a step forward. Nyssa and Roy were squaring off from individual corners of the room, the dislike radiating between them like heat haze.
"Sara was strong," Nyssa said, her eyes very black in her face.

"I survived the Mirakuru," Roy answered.

"She survived five years of hell." The words hissed from her lips.

Felicity stood up, her heart thudding uncontrollably from the anger in the room.

"You and Sara are both strong in your own ways," said Diggle, stepping between the confrontation. He took Roy's shoulders and shook him gently when he tried to struggle. "Come on now, we're almost at Nanda Parbat. We can't fall out now. Now I don't like the idea of Felicity going in alone any more than you do, but if Felicity makes that choice, I respect it. I respect her."

Diggle, to his credit, didn't mention the elephant in the room. They didn't trust Nyssa like they trusted each other.

Felicity looked away from Roy's clenched jaw, over to Nyssa, whose white-knuckled fists showed the level of tenuous control she exercised. It could have been her imagination, but there was something unbearably sad about the way she looked at Roy and Diggle, as if it hurt her to see their friendship. The way the team trusted each other. In a flicker, it was gone from her expression, as if the ripples in the water had stilled.

"I won't be alone," said Felicity, going up to Nyssa. It took a lot of nerve to touch Nyssa's forearm in a tentative brush of reassurance. But it was worth it, because the fists relaxed at her sides. Nyssa glanced at her in surprise, as if it was the last thing she'd expected was comfort from Felicity, as if she was surprised to see Felicity on her side of the room. "Don't worry, guys," Felicity smiled at Roy and Diggle. "I'll call as soon as I set up."

There was a pause for nonexistent objections.

"Now that we've settled the who, we move on to the how." Nyssa's arm slipped out of Felicity's grasp, cool and dry and unbothered. She spread out the carefully etched map of Nanda Parbat on the ancient table provided by the hostel. "Nanda Parbat has many entrances, all accessed through the front facade. The locals won't venture anywhere near there, and it'll look suspicious if you do, so we move during the night. But while I can enter from there without much trouble, it'll be harder with an untrained fighter. Even if we managed to enter through one of these entrances, they're guarded, and I need it to look as if Felicity has been in Nanda Parbat all along. But, Nanda Parbat has its secret entrances, one of which I built my chambers around —"

"Oo, hold it," Felicity said, opening one of the many computers. "I scanned the map right after you drew it, and it's been rendering the whole afternoon. 'Rendering' means that the graphics factors are converted using photorealistic tech —"

"Felicity," said Diggle.

"Right, word vomit." She got it up on the screen, and the three of them gathered around her to see it. "3D map of Nanda Parbat. I can keep adding to it once I'm in there, and if we set up the satellite connection, Roy and Diggle can see the changes too." She smiled at Nyssa. "It's touchscreen, by the way."

Nyssa bent closer, using a tapered forefinger to move the map around. "Amazing," she said, almost to herself.

Behind her back, Felicity made a triumphant thumbs-up at Diggle and Roy.
"It makes spying on my father much simpler." Nyssa glanced back at her. "Thank you, Felicity."
There was almost something like warmth in her voice, which made Felicity feel slightly better about
heading into a super-assassin den with a near-stranger. But not much.

Chapter End Notes

It's actually so much easier to write Felicity's POV than Oliver's. But I have to admit, Oliver's fun for the action scenes (which will be in the next chapter) and his general emotional constipation means a lot of internalization.

Anyway, I see Roy as Oliver and Felicity's adopted kid (seriously, they take care of him like a mom and dad) so it makes sense for the son to try and do what his dad might do in the absence of said dad. That means taking on Oliver's protectiveness of Felicity, which leads him into confrontation with Nyssa because of her plan (Lord knows how Oliver will take it).

Yup, this is a weird idea, getting Team Arrow involved with the LOA (it does get expanded on later, need to leave some explanations for when Oliver actually finds out). Like it or lump it, that's what I say, but I would still love to hear some feedback and input. Review please!

Oliver felt the metaphorical ice shift and creak beneath his feet. It was a dangerous position to be in, because he didn't know where his enemies were. Three days he'd been back, and even though Ra's had apparently been serious in using the pit as a test, Oliver still wasn't sure. Below the balcony, pairs of League members sparred with a medley of weapons, all in the peak of human physical condition, all with minds and bodies prepared for war.

The second pit, as Ra's said, symbolized rage.

The scars on Oliver's body tingled as he watched blows land on flesh. They were barely a floor up, close enough to smell the odor of blood and sweat. It was like a fight-to-the-death contest held by some warped society, where the gladiators were slaves to the ruling class. In this case, all League members were slaves to the demon, the demon who watched them with a smile on his weathered face.

"Behold, your new peers." Ra's spread his hands on the railing, watching with an expression of fierce pride. "A beautiful sight."

Oliver glanced at Ra's. Even though it wasn't the pit he'd trained in for months before being sent out, he still wasn't in the mood to be sent into anything remotely pit-related at the moment, even a simple sandpit arena.

"The human body was made for war, Oliver," said Ra's, noting his ambivalence with some amusement. "The darkness of the pit still troubles you, as it should. Blooded members still venture into the pit for training, voluntarily, of course. Some feel that they've faced their fears, and their fears will evolve and change over time, and they will continue to best them until —" Ra's smiled. "Well, I'll let you know when it's been done."

Ra's knew, because Oliver had told him, that he'd seen someone die in his arms. But he didn't know, because Oliver had changed the story, that the person had been Felicity. Oliver told him it was Moira, the guilt from not being able to change her death, to avert it.

"I know what my fears are," Oliver said frankly, glancing at Ra's. "I just don't need to see them to know they drive me."

"Truly?" Ra's said, and the edge in his voice made Oliver wary.

With surprising strength, Ra's lifted Oliver by the front of his shirt and threw him bodily into the arena below. Oliver reacted on instinct, correcting his fall with a kick off the arena wall, and rolling to disperse the force of his landing.

"Assassins!" Ra's boomed, and one by one the League sank to their knees in deference to their leader. "Among you stands your newest blooded member. Show him what it means to have survived the pit of fear."

Oliver's bare back steamed with sweat. He stepped lightly over his discarded shirt, in shreds from the vicious attacks that marked his body with cuts and scratches. It was how he preferred it anyway. Armor slowed everything down considerably, and like this, it was like training in the Foundry with Dig.
Except everyone here was an enemy.

One of them came at him with a set of twin knives. Oliver blocked the slash on his staff and forced him back, ducking as another one came at him with a katana. On it went, strike, dodge, block — regular as clockwork. Oliver saw Cheshire fighting somewhere off to the side, her hands flashing with the elongated steel claws she used instead of knives. They swirled and sliced like propeller blades, ten deadly razors wielded with deadly accuracy.

Eventually, they faced each other. Cheshire made a kissing motion with her mouth and lunged, swiping at his chest with enough force to break open his sternum. Oliver dodged, but the nails were longer than he thought, and he recoiled with five parallel strokes across his torso.

On regular days, Oliver unconsciously avoided Cheshire as if it was an aversion, and only very recently did it occur to him that she shared certain unfortunate traits with his psychopathic ex-girlfriend Helena. A power over men that went unfortunately hand-in-hand with a lack of self-control when it came to physical violence. Also — playing dirty.

She kicked sand up between them, aimed for his eyes, and swung a roundhouse kick at his head. Oliver brought his staff up to block, and her leg met the wood with a surprisingly metallic thud. While her leg was still caught, he shoved the staff behind her other foot and swept it out from under her. She went down hard, and he rested the brass-studded end of the Bo staff on her throat.

"Nice try," he said.

Cheshire bared her teeth in a hiss, but fell silent as she looked at the balcony behind Oliver. He turned to see that Ra's had raised his arm for silence.

"A good effort," he said, "an accomplished fighter, I think all would agree."

Oliver inclined his head in acceptance of the compliment, but his skin crawled with the suspicion that something else was about to happen, that Ra's was going to change the rules, alter the course of the game. The scratches on his chest throbbed in time to his heartbeat, oozing thin trails down his skin.

"But," said Ra's, and the air shivered. "How will you fare against the Demon?"

Oliver realized that the arena had emptied without him realizing, and it was just him standing in the middle of the arena. Ra's leapt from the balcony in an inky blur, landing with enough force to send a faint aftershock vibrating beneath Oliver's feet.

There were many eyes, all watching from the shadows around the ring. Seemingly unconcerned about the weight of his robes, Ra's neglected to discard them and simply drew his sword from the sash at his waist, a blade as black as charred iron and curved like a crescent moon. Despite his better judgment clamoring for him stay back, Oliver drew his staff behind his back and bowed as he'd been taught to.

The Demon accepted his salute.

"Begin," Ra's said, and lunged.
Ah, Oliver. Maybe I abuse you so much because I'm angry at your emotional constipation.

Oliver hadn't expected Ra's to make the first move. But he did, with the most fearsome example of a battle cry Oliver had ever heard. All the while, his senses screamed at him to move, until Oliver felt his limbs unfreeze and did what he'd been taught to.

He raised his staff to meet the sword, and they clashed with a vengeance. Oliver's teeth rattled from the impact, and before he could react, Ra's flung him off with enough strength to send him staggering backward. Looking down, Oliver saw that the blade had gouged out a triangular chunk of the reinforced staff. But there was no time to think, about the possibility of defeating Ra's and the consequences that would create, or about his next move — he could only respond, delegated the passive role in the confrontation.

Oliver had always prided himself with speed and strength, but Ra's made him feel like the boy on the island again. He had unearthly strength for someone who had to be in his fifties, and had the impossible speed and agility for someone weighed down by full-length robes. Still, Oliver danced around him, using his defensive moves to counter the attacks instead of making his own.

"You fight like a student — too concentrated on avoiding every misstep," said Ra's, as Oliver spun away again. "Perfect technique. But it lacks passion."

"I stay alive," Oliver replied through gritted teeth, intercepting a jab with a parrying blow that forced the blade off to his side. Ra's only shook his head and stepped in. With a screech, the sword tore deeper into the wood until it pierced Oliver's side.

Oliver twisted away from the blade with a grunt and forced Ra's off, who only moved back a few paces like he was amused. Oliver touched his side briefly, gauging the level of bleeding with his hand — it felt like a shallow cut. But there was a fire burning in the pit of his stomach.

Angry.

"Good," said Ra's, and Oliver knew that his face showed it.

Still, Oliver waited for Ra's to come to him instead. He blocked again, skirting off to the side, but Ra's leaned close to whisper, "Fear. Rage. Sorrow. You fear emotion because you think it makes you weak. You think of it as the darkness inside you."

Oliver tried not to think of the hostile presences who could hear Ra's. Tried not to think of the revenge that drove him for a year, and the consequences of those deaths. "I don't let myself get distracted," he answered.

"Master your emotions," Ra's snapped, and the blade flashed upward, criss-crossing the scratches on his chest and cutting Oliver on the chin. Before Oliver could swing his staff in the way, Ra's shoved
his foot into his chest, pinning Oliver to the ground. His right arm and the staff was trapped under his 
back, digging into his spine, while the charred-black point of the sword lingered in the hollow of his 
throat. "You started with a quest for vengeance. Then, because justice became your crusade, you 
started to fear your emotions, but instead of mastering them, you disregarded them. You pushed the 
darkness aside, but you forget that it overpowers all. You are part of the League now, Oliver. You 
will learn what it means to embrace the darkness inside you."

Oliver knelt and scooped up a handful of water from the spring that flowed behind the training arena. 
The others ignored him, splashing it on their faces and letting it trickle into their clothes. He 
swallowed a mouthful and winced when some of it got into the cut on his chin. Instead of being cold, 
the water shivered with volcanic heat, a hot spring that bubbled up from an underground channel 
somewhere inside Nanda Parbat.

Not exactly the most refreshing drink after being beaten into the ground by the Demon. Oliver 
slapped the water onto his injuries, and watched the crusted blood wash away in rusty flakes. The 
scratches on his chest tingled painfully, vivid red and swollen around the edges, not regular cuts.

"A little something extra," Cheshire said, near his ear. The steel claws dangled from the sash around 
his waist, especially the Bratva tattoo on his upper torso. "Mm."

"Poison?" Oliver said, well aware of her methods.

"Poison oak," she said, lingering gratuitously on his bare chest, especially the Bratva tattoo on his 
upper torso. "Mm."

Oliver rolled his eyes and slapped more water on the scratches. The oil from poison oak would rinse 
out, but he wasn't sure what it meant if it got into his bloodstream. He flicked the excess water from 
his fingertips and stood up, reaching for his discarded armor

Before he'd even made it two paces, Cheshire crept around him, blocking the way.

"My mistress sends for you." She trailed her fingernails lightly over his unresponsive arm. 
"Immediately."

Oliver hadn't expected Nyssa to be back so soon. Something about it set him on edge. He shoved his 
armor back on and took off, ignoring Cheshire's amused purr as he did.

Nyssa's chambers, in contrast to her father's, were located in the furthest corner of the mansion, as 
close to the city as possible. A part of Oliver had always suspected it was to make seeing Sara easier, 
but he'd never asked.

Where her father favored halls of echoing marble and ornate screens, she lived in something like a 
Dojo, all wood and tatami mats, draped in hangings of scarlet and black silk. Oliver was consciously 
aware that he was both sweating and bleeding, which made him more irritable than his usual self.

He passed the hooded guards at the sliding doors to find Nyssa sitting cross-legged and serene in the 
middle of the entryway, open palms resting on her knees. Her eyes flickered open, black tinged with 
blood red from the lantern light.

"I see you've finally brought yourself to heed my summons," she said, with a sardonic twist to her 
lips, as though she couldn't see the cuts on his face. "What part of that blood oath remains ambiguous 
to your thick skull?"
"The part where I'm supposed to gain your father's trust? You're welcome, by the way," he said. "Now I see dead people in the pit."

"Do you, now? People?" Her eyes glittered. "Or just person?"

"Does it matter?" he asked. "The pit changed. It means I've advanced."

"It means nothing until you can descend into the pit and see only stone and sand. You are still weak. It's pathetically amusing, to behold what you consider progress."

"Are you done?" Oliver said, as his side ached from the scrapes.

"Not quite. If you recall, I did promise to ensure your friends would not interfere with League business —" she held up a hand at his almost-interruption "— without bloodshed."

His voice hardened. "What did you do?"

"I found a genius little solution, really," Nyssa unfolded herself from the ground and strode down a narrow wood-paneled corridor, beckoning for Oliver to follow like a troublesome pet. Further through the maze-like corridors she led him, past the main sitting room she usually met him in, and further still, through doors that didn't even look like doors.

"What is this?" he asked, warily.

"To me, it seemed as though the real problem lay in spearhead of the crusade to bring you back. So I removed it."

She'd stopped at a wooden panel carved with phoenixes, cocking her head as though listening for something beyond. Oliver stepped closer to the door and heard metallic clicking.

She slid the wood panel aside.

"More accurately, her."

The room was lit with cool blue light from what seemed like a dozen computers, all with scrolling lines of code and veins of black wires extending back to a single pile in the center of the room. A low carved table functioned as a makeshift desk, on top of which was a sleek tablet computer. A hand groped along the briefcases for the single USB stick resting on the surface.

The fingernails were painted black.

Oliver thought he was hallucinating from Cheshire's poison, which was impossible because poison oak wasn't a hallucinogenic. No, it had to be real. A blonde head popped up from behind the computers, a hand to her ear as she said, "Roy — you're not turning the satellite dish in the right direction. It's not getting the sight line — the sight —" She sighed in exasperation. "Roy, just turn it to the left."

Felicity looked up and saw Oliver. Her eyes widened. "Roy, uh, angry-face alert — call you back. No, don't get down from the roof, just two minutes — I'll call you back."

"Hi," she said, smiling nervously for about two seconds before she got snagged in a jumble of wires she had to kick her way loose from. She made it to the doorway, but Oliver silently took a step back. In his mind's eye he just saw her in the darkness of the pit, the way her eyes looked, open and unseeing, dead in his arms. How he'd killed her.
Oliver swore he'd felt this way before, when she'd showed up with Diggle at Lian Yu. There was just something very wrong about Felicity in Nanda Parbat. The danger — how could she be so calm about the danger —?

Felicity's wary expression — the glowing screens — they all melted into a blur as he rounded on Nyssa and grabbed her arm. He didn't care if she was a woman, he just knew what she'd done. He slammed her against the wall, his forearm locked under her throat.

"This wasn't part of the plan," he snarled.

"Oliver!" said Felicity, but he ignored it, because he was trying to understand how Nyssa thought bringing Felicity to the League of Assassins was in any way helping her cause — with him, or with bringing Ra's al Ghul down.

Nyssa didn't even flinch. She cracked the back of her hand into the side of his head, twisted out from under his arm and slammed his skull into the wall so hard that the panel split. Oliver swung around, blood welling from the cut on his chin, but she had already straightened up, her fists by her sides. Her face had gone pale, her eyes very dark in comparison to the rest of her face. "If you recall," she said deliberately, "I promised not to harm your friends. As you can see, I delivered on that promise."

Oliver looked over her shoulder at Felicity, who wasn't smiling anymore. "I guess you know how it feels when someone leaves without telling you." There was a slight tremor in her voice. Her eyes lingered on his chin, her hands fidgeting as if she wanted to patch him up, like she used to back at the Foundry.

Their eyes met with a faint shiver of intuition, as if they knew they'd alighted on the same thought.

"Felicity —"

But she avoided him, and ducked instead to scoop up a coil of wires.

"I'm busy setting up," she said, her back turned. "Why don't you take a walk, Oliver?"

"Felicity," Oliver said, in a different voice.

She dropped the wires with a muted slap and stalked over until she was looking up into his face, her eyes dark with anger. "You don't get to ask questions — after you just — " Her jaw worked furiously, and he found himself wondering if she was going to shout "— abandoned the Foundry like that. One of the reasons I'm here — apart from trying to save your soul — is because you wouldn't stay in Starling. So deal with it. Get some air, and I'll talk to you later."

Backing over the threshold, she slid the door between them with a snap.

Chapter End Notes

It has occurred to me that Oliver has gotten beat up many times (two, if I'm being precise, maybe three). So I did want Felicity to give Oliver a hug. They deserve a hug, at the very least. But I also didn't want her to be one of those girls who "melts" when she sees her guy in front of her. Maybe next time.

Imagine Roy trying to set up a satellite dish, though.
Cold War

Oliver covered his eyes with his palms, started walking to the door, but he turned back to face Nyssa.

"Nyssa — why is she here?" he asked. "You know Nanda Parbat isn't for someone like her — she's not —"

"Men." Nyssa rolled her eyes to high heaven, as if she'd had the same conversation before and was tired of having it. "You're distracting yourself from the fact that there is a greater purpose. Felicity may not be able to pass as a League fighter, but she can pass as my servant."

"Your servant —"

"My household is not questioned. I am the Demon's Heir, in case you've forgotten, Oliver Queen. This is also my plan, one you pledged to support. In. Blood."

"The idea was never to involve her! And Roy's down in the village — you lied to me." Oliver was so close to losing control. "You're using them."

"Oliver Queen — unlike you, I grasped the fact that your team is stupidly loyal to you, and instead of having them interfere with your progress in the League, I brought them on to contribute. So at the very least, they'll trust me when I say that we're making progress." Nyssa's eyes flickered to the door. "She's awfully clever, you know. This MIT must train their pupils well."

Oliver didn't know whether he wanted to shout or laugh. He glanced helplessly at the door Felicity had slammed shut, shaking his head as he tried to figure out what to say. Instead, he settled for the door, leaving without another word.

Felicity blinked hard. The air in the mountain wasn't any better than the village, and it was drying her eyes out. She'd left her jacket slung over one of the computers, and was working furiously to get the connections up to speed. Satellite connection was good to begin with, but she'd need to set up routers inside Nanda Parbat to get better speeds.

Out of Nyssa and Oliver, she wasn't sure which one had a higher chance of understanding tech instructions, but Oliver had more experience with her talking computers in his ear. Except he'd gone nuclear on her again. Once Oliver cooled down, maybe she'd get him to do the heavy work.

It was quiet again outside, but she didn't want to stick her head out, in case Oliver was still in a mood to bite it off. It wasn't like she'd been expecting a welcome party, but would a smile have been too much to ask? Instead, she got the classic emotional constipation, old stone-faced Queen. Like she'd wanted to hike all the way up to a Tibetan mountaintop and try to get her computers into a place that still used old-fashioned booby traps instead of the more classic motion sensors. It was Lian Yu all over again, God forbid they show up anywhere without his express approval. It wasn't as if she was completely oblivious to what he was thinking — it was dangerous, she was going to get hurt. Again — if he'd just stayed in Starling, they could have fought together. Danger here, danger there.

Thinking about his injuries just made the uncomfortable twinge in her insides even worse. She'd patched him up plenty of times, but seeing him injured — it opened her imagination to dark possibilities. It was obvious that the training was brutal, for someone as experienced as Oliver to come back battered and cut up, and Felicity thanked Diggle and Nyssa silently for stopping Roy from coming. Even if she wasn't at a particular relationship status with Oliver, she still wanted to
make sure he was okay.

Felicity muttered comebacks to herself while she fiddled with the bugs, twisting a wire there, tightening a minuscule screw. They would need to be camouflaged, some kind of putty that blended into the walls, but once they were set up, she'd be able to hear and see anything they needed to in Nanda Parbat.

There was something else she hadn't really mentioned to anyone, something she could have told Oliver if he'd just calmed down and talked to her alone. It was embedded facial detection software that could send the faces of League members remotely to Diggle and Roy, so eventually they'd build up their own database on the League of Assassins. In case anything...in case things went south, Felicity had to know that at the very least, she'd risked her neck for a good reason.

But the one person she could tell without having her throat cut was off throwing his unique brand of temper tantrum, and she wasn't going to run after him to fix it.

"Sa'Ida."

Felicity missed the bug and stuck the screwdriver into the table by accident. A few bugs rolled under the table and got lost in the general tangle of wires. Nyssa leaned against the doorway, looking down at her with an opaque expression. Unlike Felicity, she had changed out of her regular clothes, back to hardened leather armor and the super-assassin black cloak. Felicity personally preferred her look as Nyssa Raatko than Nyssa al Ghul, but she wasn't about to tell her that.

"My father wishes to see me," she said, and laughed at Felicity's expression. "Don't worry, servants need not come. My father does not take kindly to babbling."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Needless to say, you will stay in your room and lock the door. Under no circumstances do you leave my chambers, and under no circumstances are you to speak to anyone."

"Not even the walls?" Felicity said.

Nyssa's expression dared her to say something else.

"O-kay," she said, going back to work. Scary how Angry-Face on Nyssa looked like Oliver's Angry-Face.

"I must admit, I hadn't expected Oliver to turn his anger on you as well," she said, sliding a knife into the blood red sash at her waist. Felicity wondered if her thoughts existed on a billboard behind her head.

"Oliver isn't..." Felicity gave up trying to make excuses for him, picked up the screwdriver and went back to work, her head ducked. "Is he coming back?"

"He had better," Nyssa said, with a dark look. "Or I wake him with a dagger at his throat."

"I don't think a dagger's going to do the job," Felicity muttered.

"Men," she commented, with a gleam of amusement. "What on earth do you see in them? Sara could never tell me."

Felicity put her tools down, and after a few seconds, put the bug down as well. The rounded edges rattled discordantly against the table, so she stilled it with her fingertip. When she looked up, Nyssa
looked like she was still waiting for an answer. Even though her pose was casual, her eyes were too bright, too brittle. Too much like glass — but Nyssa didn't seem to know it, that she looked breakable.

"How did you know? I mean — how do you know?" Part of Felicity hoped that Nyssa wouldn't understand her, but Nyssa inhaled slowly, thoughtfully.

"I know," she said, "I know. Call it intuition, suspicion — insanity, if you will. It was not the first time we lost one of our own, and each time the League has claimed the blood owed. But when I returned from Starling with news that Oliver Queen had refused to kill Malcom Merlyn, instead of declaring war, my father merely said that Sara was not, and had never been one of us. If he loved me, he would have avenged my Sara. He knew what she meant to me. But this was a lesson from father to daughter, and I learned it well." She palmed the hilt of her dagger. "Just not the lesson he wanted me to learn. Now, Sa'Ida, does that satisfy you?"

"I'm not judging you," Felicity said. "It's just..." and she knew Team Arrow would have killed her for saying it, since Nyssa killing Ra's al Ghul was what getting Oliver back was hinged on in the first place, "killing your father is different from shutting him down. It's a really big deal," she finished, inadequately.

"Your concern for my soul is touching, but whatever soul I had is long, long gone. Now I must see the Demon who took it from me." Nyssa crossed smoothly over the threshold and shut the door before Felicity could say anything else.

She was really having a day with closed doors.

Felicity was on her third Blueberry Surprise protein bar. There was a jar of chocolate spread in her bag somewhere, but unless she got some real food, the hundred or so bugs were starting to look like appealing hors d'oeuvres.

She took another bite of protein bar and chewed glumly. Her head itched, pillowed on one of the scratchy woolen sacks that apparently functioned as pillows. She swore the inside was filled with beans, based on the lumps and the smell of soybeans. Oo, tempting.

But the thought of Nyssa and Sara made her feel sad, the kind of sad she thought she'd said goodbye to months ago. It was silly, though, to lose someone and think you'd get it all out in one go — that one fireworks display of grief — and be immune to it for the rest of your life. The kind of love that would make a hardened assassin break down, declare a war of revenge, and basically plan to commit patricide...Felicity didn't know how to label that kind of love.

It wasn't the kind of love you could survive without.

Psh. As if she was in any position to judge. Felicity rested her heels on the folded blanket, dyed red wool with a truly indecipherable pattern. It looked suspiciously like llamas on fire. Felicity picked at a loose strand until a sound made her look up.

She'd been taught how to lock the door (which she had) using the hidden catch, which meant that no stranger was getting in unless she wanted them to. But someone was definitely on the other side of the door.

Rattling, and then a thunk. Footsteps padding around the mats, the soft swick of a door sliding closed. Then the smell. Felicity's stomach let out an embarrassing gurgle. Okay, there were definitely people outside the door.
But she remembered Nyssa's instructions and waited, doubled over her rebelling stomach, for the door to open.

"Oh Thank God," she said, when Nyssa did. Clambering to her feet with the protein bar, she ducked under Nyssa's arm on her way out. "Is that f—argh!"

There was a table, and there were dishes of steaming food, but also three place settings, and at one of them was an unrepentant-looking Oliver.
"I never thought I'd be the one to say this," said Nyssa, "but you are both behaving like children."

It did have the makings of a very convoluted family dinner. The dinner table was really more of a coffee table, so everyone had to sit cross-legged on the floor to eat. Seated to Nyssa's right, Felicity held her bowl and slurped her noodles. She glanced at Oliver. His head was cocked to the side, and he looked at Nyssa like she'd just said something mildly interesting. Otherwise, he'd just been swallowing potstickers on the other side of the table, using his chopsticks a lot better than Felicity could. Annoying.

He'd showered since she last saw him, and since there were no bloodstains on his shirt she assumed he'd bandaged himself up. Even though her hands itched to make sure, she chewed the odd-tasting meat and kept quiet.

"My plan does not involve the both of you at odds," Nyssa said sharply. "Now," she turned to Felicity. "Explain it to him."

Oliver shot Felicity an opaque look. Felicity worked on her mouthful for a few more seconds, then gulped loudly. In the interests of maturity (and not getting on Nyssa's bad side), she set her food down and pulled a bug out of her jacket pocket.

"So the idea is to get as much audio-visual coverage of Nanda Parbat as possible. These feed off the wireless signal from my evil computer in the back room. I need you both to start sticking them everywhere, because once you do, it means Roy and Dig can get everything down in the village. Then I'll be out of your hair and Broody can go back to being Broody."

Oliver visibly ignored the last part. "Fine," he said. "Then she goes back to the village." That was directed at Nyssa.

"Fine, then you can go back to having your head in your ass."

"Xara," Nyssa said, getting to her feet.

What was she doing? She was on Oliver's side of the table, her other hand reaching towards her side. Before Felicity could say anything, Nyssa's dagger was in her hand, and with a flash of steel, she opened a slash on Oliver's chest.

Felicity was on her feet in a second. "Nyssa!"

Oliver rounded on Nyssa. "What the hell —"

"That should give you two enough common ground," she said, cutting him off. With tremendous unconcern, she wiped her dagger on the edge of a napkin and stalked into another room. "I don't much care how, but take care of it."
"I've got it," Oliver said irritably, as Felicity tried to probe at the injury with a wet napkin.

"You could get tetanus," she snapped back, and rooted around in the first-aid kit she'd stuffed into her bag. There was a butt-load of disinfectants, thank God. She ripped one of the packets open with her teeth and slapped Oliver's hands out of the way so that she could clean the wound.

He gave a long-suffering kind of sigh and went back to holding his shirt out of the way. Felicity poked at the medley of cuts and scratches across his chest, all of varying degrees of freshness. The one Nyssa opened was about as long as her hand, and not deep, but it had cut through the older wounds and caused some bleeding. The five parallel scratches looked eerily like claw marks, and she had to bite back her question about fighting wild animals.

"Did you clean the other ones?" she asked, running the antiseptic pad across them anyway. She wasn't sure if she was meant to dig the pad in, but hey, if it made Oliver wince it probably meant that it was working.

"I put some hot water on it."

Felicity snorted. "Right, because STD infections cower before the might of hot water."

"What?" said Oliver, not that she could blame him.

She didn't even know what. Her brain had obviously decided to go rogue, again.

"Word vomit." Felicity cleared her throat and rummaged in the kit for antibiotic cream. They didn't have Q-tips, so she wiped off her fingertips with the disinfectant pad and dabbed the medicine on with her fingers.

"FYI," she said, making a face at the stickiness of the open wounds. Bleeding cuts and dinner had pretty much killed any remaining appetite. "Hot water just makes the bleeding start again. Next time, use warm water."

Belatedly, she realized that she'd gotten closer to him than she thought. Oliver's words tickled her hair as he asked, "Since when do you know that?"

They were still at the dinner table, Oliver sitting cross-legged while Felicity crouched beside him to get at the wounds. Avoiding his eyes, she pushed a loose fall of hair behind one ear with a knuckle and dabbed cream into the fresh cuts. At least he hadn't murmured it.

"When you're running around with a vigilante, you pick stuff up." She looked at him over her glasses. "But," she said, as a cut in his side started bleeding again. "It's increasingly obvious that I know nothing about first-aid, so I guess I'm just doing this to hurt you. Crap, crap, crap." She reached for a napkin and pressed it down to stop the bleeding.

Oliver shook his head and looked off to the side, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Can't say you don't deserve to," he said.

"You think?" she answered.

"Felicity," he began, and paused. Felicity looked up to find that he was watching her.

"We should be on the same side," he said. "You and me. I'm sorry that I lost sight of that. It's just —"

He looked down at his injuries, not just cuts and scratches but yellowed bruises and fresh purple ones from whatever the League was doing to him, and back at her. "I just don't want you to see me like
Felicity sat back on her heels, wondering where he was going with this apology. She'd forgiven him, and she always would — after he stopped being stubborn. That was the routine. "Oliver, I've seen you worse," she said, pointedly. "Shot and bleeding in my car, poisoned and bleeding on a table, bruised ribs, bullet wounds…should I go on?"

He shook his head abruptly. "Not like this. Not just my body. My mind. It's changing, I can feel it. Ra's brings out something dark in me, and the worst part is," he winced and pressed on the wound in his side, displacing her hands. "I think the darkness was already in me, and I never learned how to control it. I just pretended it didn't exist, and now it's coming to take me. If — when — that happens, I don't want you there to see it. I'm sorry — but I don't."

"Oliver." Felicity put her hands on his shoulders, holding on despite his attempt to twist away. "Not when, not if. I'm here, we're all here. Roy, Dig, me — we've all come to take you home."

Oliver shook his head, and she grabbed his face impatiently, forcing him to look at her. His hair was still damp from the shower he'd taken, spiking against her antiseptic-and-alcohol-smeared hands. But she looked closer, matching him to her memory of Oliver a year ago. Seared into the back of her mind, unshakable, from the only few times that they'd ever been this close. The thin lines at the corners of his eyes, the way his cheekbones showed prominent in his well-formed face, the straight ridge of his nose. He was a study in contours, a study in shadowing. She could see the darkness in the center of his eyes, the ring of dark blue surrounded by the color of a blazing summer sky. The same Oliver.

There was a cut in his chin, one that went deep, like it was made with a blade. Felicity frowned, and stopped herself from running her thumb over it in case she opened the cut again. Instead, she said firmly, "Everyone has darkness in them, but you fight it. That's what people do. That's what heroes do. What's the point of all that training if you can't fight that stupid voice at the back of your head?"

Oliver shut his eyes for a second and inhaled, and Felicity found herself watching his lips, still faintly wet from when he'd licked his lips. He had a narrow mouth, often pursed, one that turned down naturally at the corners.

"You help me fight it," he said, softly, almost too soft to hear. "You help me fight that darkness." Oliver opened his eyes suddenly, and Felicity fought a shudder that went to the base of her spine. "Thank you, Felicity."

Their faces were inches apart, but she broke away first. She patted the sides of his face, wondering if she was doing it shakily or if it was just her.

"No problem," she said, with a smile, and reached for the antiseptic again. "Now do I want to know why you're fighting a feral cat?" she asked.

"Second stage of training. The League apparently thinks throwing me into a pit with twenty other assassins will teach me how to master my rage."

"Hm," she said, smearing cream into the cut on his chin. "And this?"

"Ra's is very hands-on with his training."

She blew out her breath. "I haven't met him, but that sounds worse than going up in front of everyone during ninth-grade assembly and singing *Sweet Disposition* by Temper Trap. Congratulations for not peeing your pants, because I totally would've. Maybe I did," she added,
dramatically.

Oliver made a noise of amusement. "You would've held your own."

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she said, ripping open a packet of sterile bandages. She did his side first, smoothing down the edges with tape. "Do you ever wonder," she asked, "that your Bratva tattoo's going to get so cut up that your Russian buddies won't be able to tell it's you the next time you call in a favor?"

"Felicity," said Oliver, sounding choked up. "I don't take off my shirt whenever I need a favor from Knyazev."

"Food for thought," she said, and he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Garghhh, I know I have to hang in there until 3.08 and 3.09. Until then, I'll keep calm and have faith in Olicity. Also - 'Xara', I think, is an Arabic curse word that means 'crap' or something similar. Don't go by me, I don't speak Arabic.

P.P.S. - Outlander is a very good TV show that I've recently got into. Completely of zero relevance to Olicity, but it's one of the reasons why I'm late with the update. (Y)
Felicity needed coffee. She craved it, like the source of all her powers was a good strong cup of Nespresso. But she also knew that super assassins were unlikely to invest in coffee to stay awake, and it was Tibet, where anything that lacked an ability to resist high-altitude weather basically died on the spot.

That, she could deal with. Also, fun disguises.

But hers was baffling. It was a weird three-piece thing that she had to lay out on the table to make some sense of it, because there was so much fabric. A kind of translucent black undershirt whose sleeves only went down to her elbows, and a sleeveless knee-length robe that supposedly went over the whole thing — also black — and bright red trousers.

She smelled breakfast from the other side of the door, but felt like a kid trying to come down from the top of the staircase in a Halloween costume.

"I am so going to regret this," she said, imagining coffee on the other side of the door. Then she reached for the clothes.

The pants went on fine — with some drawstring effort — and so did the shirt, but when Felicity tried to shove the robe onto her head, it stuck around her shoulders and refused to go down any further. She was stuck with her arms above her head, hands semi-sticking out of the armholes, her glasses squashed against her face.

"Um," she said.

Oliver turned a bug over in his hand, and slipped it back into his pocket to join the small pouch of identical fellows. After a surprisingly restful night, he’d already worked out in his mind where they’d need to be. Felicity hadn’t specified the city walls, but they’d need a few there. Now all he had to do was split the task between him and Nyssa.

But when he arrived at her chambers, he only found Nyssa at the dining table, eating her breakfast. He glanced at the panel that supposedly led to Felicity's room, and Nyssa noticed.

Maybe it showed how little he trusted Nyssa to keep an eye on Felicity.

"What an expression, Oliver Queen," said Nyssa, setting down her cup. "Won't you join me?" The last part sounded more like an order than an invitation, but he sat down anyway. The League dining hall was where he typically had his meals, alone and watched by hostile eyes. He had to admit that eating with Nyssa was marginally more pleasant — if she decided to keep her knife to herself this time.

"As long as you promise not to cut me open again," he said, stiffly.

She merely smiled unnervingly and pushed an empty bowl towards him. The League ate what the locals in the village below ate, which meant that they were equally limited by the high-altitude climate that made it difficult to grow anything non-resilient, like rice or fruit. Oliver had survived on a desert island, so it was hardly a challenge to get used to the food. It was mostly dried or spiced
mutton and yak meat, and no white bread. Oliver took some tsampa – barley bread made with yak butter – and drank soupy butter tea without comment.

"Where's Felicity?" he asked, finally.

Nyssa merely sipped at her tea unconcernedly. "I imagine she's still trying to puzzle out the mystery of her disguise. Must be quite baffling to the girl."

"What?"

"You can't expect her to wander around in her regular clothes. You might as well paint spy on her back and let one of the archers take care of her."

Oliver was still trying to reconcile the idea of Felicity in League clothes with the idea that she wasn't supposed to leave Nyssa's chambers. "But —"

Felicity's door slammed aside, and Oliver fell silent. It took a few seconds to figure out exactly what he was looking at. Instead of seeing her, he saw a bundle of writhing fabric over her head and torso, and a handspan of bare, white midriff that showed above the waistband of her trousers.

"Oliver? You there?" she said, muffled through the clothes.

"Uh," he said, unable to take his eyes off the expanse of bare skin.

"Oliver."

He glanced self-consciously at Nyssa — who was sipping her tea, very unbothered — and got to his feet.

Felicity stumbled instinctively towards the sound of his footsteps, bumping into him when he got too close. His hands automatically went to her waist to steady her, and the warmth of her skin filled his palms like a shock of electricity. He removed them immediately, folding them back into inoffensive fists. "What…what do you want me to do?"

"Pulling would be nice."

"Right." Oliver said, and pulled.

"I feel like one of those inflatable tube men," Felicity grunted, as her arms managed to get through the armholes. Oliver had to bite his lip so he wouldn't laugh. Eventually, through some wriggling, her head finally poked through. She was flushed, glasses askew, her hair clouding around her face like she'd just rolled out of bed.

"Thanks," she panted, straightening her glasses. "Dig and Roy never find out about this, capisce?"

Oliver started to open his mouth, but he found that he couldn't keep a straight face, and his face was starting to ache from fighting it.

"Don't," she said, and stalked over to the dining table.

Felicity felt very floppy in her clothes, and had to actively fight the urge to do weird dance moves. Which would be embarrassing to both Tibetan culture and her fragile dignity. The fabric wasn't scratchy, it just felt odd to her. Plus there was also the embarrassing fact that she'd gotten stuck in her clothes, in front of the only two people she knew in Nanda Parbat, on her first day in the cool undercover job.
Perfect.

Oliver was back in his seat, hiding his face with his cup. She shot a glare in his direction, because he could wear cool badass leather armor while she wore — well — pajamas, basically. Pajamas that she'd managed to get stuck over her head. She regretted not leaving instructions on how she wanted her funeral — since the odds of her dying by assassin and dying of embarrassment were, at the moment, neck in neck.

"Congratulations for solving the puzzle," said Nyssa. "Now, if we could discuss the — as you called it — bugging?"

Listening to Nyssa and Oliver debate locations, Felicity reached for the teapot and poured something into her cup. It was thick like milk and smelled like it. Felicity shrugged and took a gulp.

And choked. But at least she tried to do it quietly, trying to figure out how it could be buttery, sweet, and salty, all at the same time. Oliver and Nyssa still noticed.

"Butter tea," said Oliver, pushing water in her direction. "It takes some getting used to."

"Yak milk," Nyssa said, with a sweet smile. "Churned to butter, diluted with black tea."

"Yaks are cute," Felicity said, gulping water. As her head cleared, a thought occurred to her and she perked up. "Now that I'm all dressed up, does that mean I get to leave the room?"

"No," Oliver said, as Nyssa simultaneously said "yes".

"Only when you are with me," Nyssa corrected. "I may need you to do the bugging when I'm being watched."

"I'll bug Ra's' chambers," Oliver said, instantly sensing where it was going. Nyssa was not going to bring Felicity to Ra's al Ghul's chambers.

Nyssa shook her head. "That will need to be the last. Spying on my father, I'm afraid, will need to be a joint effort."

Oliver disagreed, but as she said, it'd have to be the last thing. Bugging the rest of Nanda Parbat would be comparatively simple, and a fallback. If anything went wrong, at least they'd have most of the place under watch.

"Spying is one thing," he said, "but taking down your father is another. You still haven't told me how spying on him is going to be part of it."

Nyssa smiled like his question was an expected one. "You may not know this, but my father has led an extraordinarily long life. How is it that a man of his age can look, move, and kill like a berserker?"

"Drugs," Felicity said. "That's how the Viking berserkers used to work themselves into the battle-rage."

"You could say my father uses something similar." Nyssa drew a circle with her fingertip. "Except his version is a pit. To be precise, the Lazarus pits."

"Lazarus?" Felicity had heard the name before. "The guy who rose from the dead?"

She glanced at Oliver, who looked unconvinced.

"You're saying your father uses the pit to strengthen himself?" Oliver didn't see how the pit of fear
was of any use to a long life. Shortening it, maybe.

"Not the pit you are thinking of," Nyssa said. "The pits are of the earth, but they don't exist within
Nanda Parbat. My father possesses the locations of certain geological formations, which for whatever
reason, have the ability to chemically alter his body and render him — for the lack of a better word
— immortal."

"And you want to change that."

"Correct."

"But if he's immortal," Felicity said, "the whole point kinda is that it's irreversible. He won't die."

"That's where you have a use, Sa'Ida. If the pit's effects were mystical in nature, then he'd not need
to return to the pits to replenish his strength. There must be a chemical that slowly filters away until
he finds himself in need of it again."

"But then we'd need a blood sample, and I can't deal with one here, I'd need STAR Labs, or at least
QC's R&D…" Felicity was itching to pick up pen and paper to start her calculations, or pick up a
phone to call Caitlin…

"You want me to get your father's blood," Oliver said, "from when he trains me in the pit."

"Yes," said Nyssa. "I want you to make the demon bleed."

Oliver's hands curled into fists.

"Oh is that all?" Felicity said. "Can't you stop him from going to the pits? Like collapse it, or
something?"

"He doesn't take me with him," said Nyssa. "I only know of the pits because he let slip that he might
choose to give me one in the future, but even then he keeps the locations highly secret. The pits can
only be used once, after which the chemical ceases to exist. So the only option I see is to find a way
to "cure" this immortality and attack him. Then I will strike the final blow."

It sounded an awful lot like what they'd done with Slade. Except Slade wasn't in charge of a League
of deadly trained killers, and they hadn't killed him.

"I can't make Ra's al Ghul bleed," Oliver said. Felicity glanced at him. The cut on his chin had
scabbed over, but she knew there were more under his clothes, and three guesses who'd given them
to him.

"But you'll have to," said Nyssa, with an unforgiving smile.

The tension frizzled the air over the breakfast table.

"So," Felicity said, brightly, to defuse the nuclear atmosphere. "Spying and a blood sample — what
could possibly go wrong?"

"Hey," said Felicity, as Oliver got up to go. "You okay?"

"What do you mean?" He swung the quiver over his shoulder, wearing an unconvincingly placid
expression.

Felicity clambered back to her feet, joining him at the door.
"You don't have to get that blood sample, Oliver," she said. "There's other ways we can do this. I know that Ra's isn't exactly...beatable...at the moment."

He exhaled, loudly, and she knew that he was going to dodge the issue, as usual. "You just be careful. Stick close to Nyssa, and don't talk to anyone."

"You know, a little part of me wants to take offense at that."

"You know what I mean. Don't bring us any questions we can't answer."

"I can take care of myself, Oliver. I think we proved that with Cooper," Felicity said, testily. Oliver looked less than enthusiastic at the memory of her hacker ex-boyfriend. "Your ex wasn't exactly an army of trained killers," he answered, quietly.

They were steam-rolling towards a fight again, so Felicity was the one to step away, deliberately. "Hey," she said, searching for another lighter topic, "You know, I've been thinking about giving myself a name — while I'm here, I mean. Felicity doesn't exactly sound League-ish, does it?"

"I've been thinking that I should call myself something cool while I'm here, like Katia...but Nyssa keeps calling me Sa'Ida, whatever that means..."

"Felicity," Oliver said, smiling — God, Oliver smiling.

"What?" she asked, nervously.

"Nyssa already gave you a name. Sa'Ida means lucky," he said. "So does Felicity."

She paused. How do you know what my name means?

Especially since she'd only recently found out herself, during a particularly boring afternoon at her nightmare thankfully-ex-job at the Tech store. Oliver was still smiling as he turned his back, as though he could tell what she was thinking from her expression.

"It suits you," he added, and stepped over the threshold, closing the door behind him, leaving her with the new name on her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Btw, thank you to the reviewer who corrected my crappy attempt at Arabic (so sorry - both for before, and what's going to happen below) (Full disclosure, I'm Chinese, I speak Chinese and I've lived in Hong Kong, Beijing and currently am in London studying law).

Sa'Ida, I think (and correct me if I'm wrong), is pronounced Sah-yee-da and it does mean either 'luck' or 'lucky', which is what Felicity means in Latin. So yeah - just me being weird with parallels. I just like the idea that Oliver knew all along that Felicity's name meant luck :) especially since he's an archer. I also like the idea that Nyssa thought to call her that. Oo, and I read on some website (haha sketchy internet, right?) that Sa'Ida is a variation of 'Sara', so make of that what you will.
Teaming Up

Chapter Notes

Must admit, I was stuck until this chapter all weekend because I didn't do a thorough enough job with the story mapping, but I think I kind of have it on track now. Hence the four chapters in one go because I just couldn't stop.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity clung to the shadows behind a wooden column, and tried to look like she belonged there. Her glasses not being on her face, today of all days, made her feel oddly naked, especially with her hair braided off her face (at Nyssa's suggestion, because apparently servants weren't allowed to have easy hair days).

There was a constant nagging feeling at the back of her skull, like she was being watched, even though — to her knowledge, at least — no one had paid her any attention today, which was a good thing. There were other assassins standing on the balcony as well, all looking down. Still, their presence meant that she had to control her expression of horror, especially at what was going on in the arena below her.

She clutched Nyssa's folded cloak close to her like a pillow as she looked below, at the blurred figures engaging in fierce hand-to-hand combat. The one with shining black curls was Nyssa, her skin a whorl of tan and bronze as she took on lower-level assassins like it was just another day.

Felicity winced as Nyssa sent an assassin flying across the arena with a two-footed kick to the chest, and threw the other one into the sand. She looked away as Nyssa talked to them in a low murmur, at the others waiting outside the arena. Oliver…Oliver…

She couldn't find him until the arena abruptly emptied, and he was suddenly walking in with the others – and Nyssa, without so much as a glance in his direction, withdrew. Felicity was momentarily confused at what was happening, at why Oliver had a) lost his shirt and b) his bandages from the night before. Then they all raised their weapons and Battle Royale-style mayhem broke loose. Oliver (questionably) used a staff where the others had swords and knives and — holy crap — claws. The crazy one with the claws was an Asian woman who stalked Oliver like Carrie Cutter stalked the Arrow, always to the side, even while he was fighting someone else.

Felicity bit her lip, painfully, when Claws finally struck, with a graceful leap and a downward slash of steel. Oliver blocked and forced her back with the end of the staff, moving smoothly to engage her. She had the potential to be another Isabel Rochev, what with the leggy-model look and homicidal killing skills.

"Calm yourself, Sa'Ida," said Nyssa, appearing suddenly behind her, all bronzed skin and glittering black eyes – terrifyingly Amazonian. It took all her self-control not to yelp, but she managed it.

Felicity tasted blood in her mouth as she handed Nyssa her cloak and robes. Nyssa declined, since her skin still glistened with sweat from training. She'd stripped down to a kind of black sleeveless undershirt and deep red trousers tucked into black boots, paramilitary style. But she did take some time to consider her cloak before handing it back to Felicity, who felt a small hard shape pass over her hand, a bug.
There was a faint click as it went to its spot, and Nyssa's hands withdrew from the cloak.

"Anyone of interest?" Nyssa asked, casually, as though she was aware of the spectators, the eyes on the Demon's Heir.

Felicity shook her head mutely, turning back to look at the fighting. She could smell the sweat flying off the moving bodies, the adrenaline spiking to an impossible crescendo, the viciousness of the attacks. For day-to-day training, it looked very much like a fight to the death.

Felicity's fingers dug into the wooden railing when the claws opened up a slash on Oliver's back. But Oliver didn't make a sound. He rolled instinctively out of the way, picking up a thin coat of sand with his blood and sweat, and fought on.

One year of this.

Felicity turned her face away from Nyssa's curious stare, and tried to remember that she'd watched Oliver fight successfully for his life before, and today wouldn't be any different.

Oliver's cuts had opened again, a score of them leaving red tracks down his back and chest. He hesitated briefly at the hot pools, remembering Felicity's advice, but poured water on the cuts anyway. Since they were bleeding already, what was the difference?

His injuries were on the light side because Ra's hadn't come today, probably because Nyssa had returned to take up her responsibilities as the Heir. It was a relief, because if Nyssa was there, it meant that Felicity was too, and regardless of what she'd seen before, he wanted to put it off as long as possible.

He'd been the last to leave the arena, keen to avoid Cheshire and the others. The bugs were still in the inner pocket of his armor, just waiting for an opportunity to be used. As soon as he'd done his share of the bugging, he could stop by Nyssa's chambers to check in on Felicity, even though he'd just seen her that morning. Now that he knew Felicity was in Nanda Parbat, he was in an odd paradoxical position of unjustified anxiety.

Thinking of Nyssa and Felicity alone in the same room filled him with an odd sense of discomfort, a little like leaving Thea with Roy while they were dating. It was completely unfounded, but Oliver couldn't really help it. He was in a paradoxical position: he didn't trust Nyssa, but he trusted that she was the safest option now that Felicity was within Nanda Parbat.

But he didn't have time for that.

Oliver looked over his shoulder, his gaze slow and careful. The back of the arena was silent, except for the faint gurgling of the water. There was another fight going on in the arena, and he was aware that it was the odd in-between time when no one had come to wait in the wings yet. He grabbed the bugs and climbed high to plant them, all the while on the lookout for watchers. The putty did a decent job of camouflaging the cameras, and from his spot on the ground, he almost forgot where he'd planted them. Two on either ends of the room, ready to pick up the wireless commands.

Oliver tucked the pouch back into his armor as a fresh group of fighters entered, and bent to wash the blood and grime from his hands.

Felicity kept her head down, eyes fixed on her shoes, trying to ignore the \textit{ALERT-ALERT-ALERT} lights flickering madly inside her head. Basically every person walking by her was an assassin who probably knew eight different ways to decapitate her and make it look like she'd done it herself.
She'd radically overestimated Nyssa's altruistic tendencies. Barely four hours into her first day undercover, and she'd already been left on her own. While Oliver was still fighting (thirty minutes in, by the way), Nyssa had been approached by some sketchy-looking League members, all looking old enough to be her parents, and they'd left after Nyssa had given her the standard speech to go straight back and not talk to anyone. Apparently – the meeting was important. And private, so bringing a servant would draw unnecessary questions. So, there she was, on her own, watching Oliver fight for his life in the arena.

Speaking of — she still didn't see Oliver. She hoped that she'd chosen the right place to wait, and she wasn't lurking outside the League equivalent of the changing rooms, just being creepy.

Felicity glanced briefly up, and looked back down just as quickly. She'd caught a glimpse of the woman Oliver had been fighting, Crazy Claw Lady. There was no way she couldn't recognize Claws, the way she padded silently like a feline, those insane scissor-kicking legs... Felicity suppressed a shudder as Claws passed her. She smelled the acrid scent of something smoky coming off her clothes, the thick, papery smell of charred wood.

But the stairwell emptied, and she was alone again.

"What are you doing here?"

"Claws!" Felicity shouted, and realized that she was about a foot away from where she'd started out.

Oliver's expression was of the you're-in-trouble-angry-face variety, and he was seemingly unconcerned by the perspiration gleaming on his skin.

"Jesus, Oliver, you all right?" Felicity asked, running a brief mental checklist for his injuries. No fresh ones except for those she'd seen inflicted on him, cut on the back and bruises near the ribs.

"Don't change the subject," he said.

"I'm serious," she answered back, slightly insulted that he thought she'd use his injuries as a distraction. "Are you okay?"

Oliver's face lost some of its tension. "Sorry," he said, touching her arm lightly. "It's nothing."

Felicity looked down and noticed — belatedly — he hadn't completely done up the front of his armor and she could see a nice bit of his chest through the gap.

"What part of sticking with Nyssa did you forget?"

"Uh —" she said, and shook her head to clear it. "Nyssa got pulled away, and I thought we could do some bugging for the afternoon."

His eyes narrowed slightly, as if he didn't believe that Nyssa had left her alone, that Felicity had somehow managed to sneak away from the master spy. Which was flattering, to be honest, but not exactly conducive to neutralizing angry-face.

She knew he was fighting the urge to send her back to the Foundry, or the Nanda Parbat equivalent of it, anyway. "Roy and Dig aren't here," she said. "Like it or not, I'm your partner for this little undercover shebang."

Angry-face was seeing reason. Yes. Throat working, conscience fighting, just one more push —

"I thought you wanted me out of here ASAP?" Felicity added, innocently. "We do this, and things
go that much faster." As if to demonstrate, she pulled out the mapping device she'd brought with her, ready to link up the bugs to her computer.

"Put something over your hair," he said, finally. "We're heading into the city."

Chapter End Notes

Bwahahahaha - plot. Oliver and Felicity going into Nanda Parbat central. Also - noticing each other's skin. Bwahahaha - this might really be sleep deprivation, I don't know.
Trust Exercise

Chapter Notes

So this a really fun chapter to write. I'm really weird, and I'm sure you'll be wondering why. (Shrug).

"Oliver — why do you keep scratching your back?" Felicity asked, after the third time.

"Poison oak," he said, shortly, keeping his eyes on a torn flap of canvas, fluttering quietly from the air currents.

Felicity looked away from the faint blue glow of her mapping device, which she was filling in as they went along. "Who in the what now?"

"Scratch," he said. "Cheshire has a habit with irritating poisons."

"Ohhhh — you mean the Carrie with the claws?"

Oliver shot a sidelong glare at her. "Can you not bring her up in a regular conversation?"

"Oh I'm sorry," said Felicity, pulling the shawl low over her hair as more water dripped onto them from a questionable hole in the canvas roof, "but I gave up on regular when you decided to hide in the back of a wagon with the dead relatives of the Scarecrow from Oz."

As if to prove her point, the wagon rolled over an uneven patch of wall, and the wheels squeaked in protest, the dried bales of grass tumbling past them both. They were both on their stomachs, their heads facing the flapping canvas curtain at the back of the wagon. When the wagon jolted again, one bale landed on her butt. Felicity flicked a stalk of grass from her face and tossed it at Oliver. He only rolled his eyes and tossed a bug through the flap. The putty caught on the iron ledge, the underside of a glowing brazier.

"Nice," she said, in spite of herself, adding the bug to their uplink.

"Almost there," he said, peering through the torn flap. "Remember to duck."

"Mm-hm." Felicity kept watching the intermittent chunks of stone and mortar that showed through the canvas, wondering if she'd ever get a good look over the city walls. Sure, she wasn't there to be a tourist, but still, how often could she tell absolutely nobody that she'd been to a city of assassins inside a Tibetan mountain?

Well, Roy and Dig might be interested. But they'd be getting satellite access to the sights anyway.

Oliver's hand touched her shoulder, warm and steady.

The wagon creaked to a halt, and a brief conversation ensued. Felicity caught fragments of what sounded like Chinese — maybe Hindi — it was too fast to tell. But there was a laugh, and the pressure of Oliver's hand increased abruptly. Felicity ducked, pressed low behind the stacked bales of grass, the faintly warm device pressing against her collarbone. Footsteps went around the wagon, and the curtain cracked, a pane of amber light hitting the spot above her head.
The curtain dropped, leaving them in semi-darkness again. The footsteps receded, and the wagon moved a few feet further. Someone whistled, and the wagon began to sink. Felicity's stomach dropped, like she was in the QC elevator and it was shooting down to the ground floor.

The straw beside her rustled ever so slightly. "Pulley system," Oliver murmured in her ear, and he pulled the flap up, gesturing for her to move closer.

Felicity scooted towards the hole, looking through it like a telescope. For a moment, the brightness of the lights blinded her, but then her vision adjusted and she saw the improbable sprawl of Nanda Parbat, the Assassin's City.

"No way," she breathed, pressing closer, as though she could drink in the oddly archaic sight of a walled city. It resembled pictures of the old Beijing hutongs, the disorderly close-set jumble of low houses and courtyards, beautiful chaos. There were striking red tiles on traditional Chinese gabled roofs, beasts carved out of stone that stood sentry over the streets, torches burning bright and strong to make it brighter than she ever thought possible — for a city that had never seen the sun.

They only spoke when the wagon stopped its descent.

"You eventually get used to the impossible," Oliver murmured thoughtfully, reminding her that their faces were side by side, lit by the same narrow shaft of orange light.

Felicity let the shawl slip past her head, allowing her cheek to briefly brush Oliver's, as the wagon wobbled to a start again and the motion threw their shoulders together. "I still haven't," she answered, resisting the urge to turn her face to his. "You can't just accept things, remember?"

"It's not exactly Vegas with your mother," he said, equally quiet, and made her smile.

Felicity pushed a bale of straw behind her back and adjusted her cramping legs. She watched Oliver's lean back, very still, watchful as a lion in the savannah. They were both crouched near the mouth of the wagon, waiting for a chance to slip away unseen. Patches of the city passed by, meaningless to her in terms of direction, but not to Oliver. She smelled grease fires that made her think of deliciously sketchy street food, the rattle of carts and wagons rolling perilously close, the drawl of old ladies gossiping while the babies and children they minded gurgled and laughed.

She jolted back to the present when Oliver turned and easily, naturally, reached for her hand. The leather glove was warm from the skin beneath, reminding her of other times when she'd felt it against her skin. It was not in any way an appropriate time to be thinking about it, but it did bring back the sense of how much she trusted Oliver to take care of himself when he went about doing his usual Arrow-vigilante stunts. And how much he trusted her, to finally accept that she was going to do the crazy-reckless stunts along with him.

Like jumping out the back of a moving wagon, straight as an arrow, right into traffic.

One hell of a trust exercise.

But —

"Go," he said, and Felicity instinctively tightened her grip on his hand.

The curtain parted and Felicity pitched forward along with Oliver. She hit the ground and rolled, a blur of precarious sound and hurtling danger, only conscious of the grooved cobblestones beneath her back and the sudden feel of Oliver not at her side, but around her —
They hit wall with a dull crunch. Felicity opened her eyes to find a ceiling of wood planks and a wheel behind her head. Apparently, they’d rolled right under a wood cart parked at the side of a house. The wall behind Felicity’s back shifted, and she realized belatedly that it wasn’t a wall, but Oliver, who’d thrown himself behind her before they made impact.

Oliver’s shoulders cracked as he moved away from the wall. "You okay?"

Felicity nodded. "Thanks to a human air mattress."

He made a noise that sounded like a laugh, and winced as they peeled apart from each other, his torso from her back, extricating themselves from the confusing tangle of knees and crisscrossed legs. Felicity kicked her way loose of her ridiculous robe and slid out from the bottom of the cart first, brushing herself off and tightening the shawl over her hair. She chanced a look around, but they were off the main road, near a row of tethered wagons behind a house.

Oliver followed, straightening up with enviable grace, nonchalantly pulling up his hood to hide his face. He glanced back at her before he started to lead the way — like he’d somehow memorized the map of the city, which she realized that was probably true, by Oliver-Queen-standards, anyway.

Felicity checked that the device was still in the folds of her robe, blew out her breath slowly and prayed that nothing would go wrong.
Fun, fun, fun. The non-spoilery comments about the Flash/Arrow crossover screening are driving me nuts. I think I will die if Oliver really does go off with the LOA. Nooooooooo. Take Felicity with youuuuu.

Also - I hate it when shows (Outlander) only belatedly make it known that they're going on hiatus for six-effing-months and only after I've burned through six of the eight available episodes in one night. Jeez. Also, completely irrelevant, but I've read the first two books, so yeah, that took a while.

Oliver navigated Nanda Parbat, pursuing multiple trains of thought as he moved through the crush of people. First, setting up bugs in the places that he could reach without looking suspicious, like the shadows beside alleyways and the underside of wall ledges — quick touch-and-go. Second, mentally marking out the vantage points he’d need to sneak back to later, when the city went dark for artificial nighttime. Thirdly, making sure Felicity stayed close. Which was the easiest task, by far. She was carrying a virtual map, so they had to stop a few times and hide in deserted side streets while she entered the rough specifications into her rendering program.

The black shawl slid down to her neck again, baring the distinctive ashy gold. Oliver automatically pulled it back up, yanking it unnecessarily low over her eyebrows. It got him a pointed glare, but her fingertips continued to glide across the glowing blue screen, adjusting and adding strings of code that were meaningless to anyone below her IQ level.

He looked both ways down the side street again, making sure that they weren't being followed. Part of him still wished he'd put her back in the computer room, that Roy was in the field with him, that Diggle was on backup, that Felicity's voice and the reassuring sound of her fingers flying across the keyboard would be in his ear while he worked.

"Stop wishing I was back in the Foundry," she said, without looking up.

Oliver cleared his throat, uncomfortable at being caught thinking out loud. "Do you have it?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yu—p," she said, clicking a button that powered down the screen. She slipped it back into her robe and clinched the shawl tightly around her with a faint smile. "Let's go."

It took all of Felicity's self-control not to go absolutely nuts with the novelty of exploring the city. The physics of an underground city, the culture that went into the families and communities built up over time…if Barry were here, he would have gone just as nuts as she wanted to. As she passed them, Felicity caught tantalizing glimpses of their lives, the languages they spoke — some of it English. Nyssa was right about her not being an obvious outlander. There were children blonder than she was running down the streets, dodging past moving carts and busy adults like they hadn't a care in the world.
They could have been the children down in the village, where Roy and Dig were.

Except the kids had weapons too. She saw small knives at their sides, heard small pouches at their waists clanking with metal, and was reminded where she was.

"I didn't know the League was cool with family values," she said, pinching the corner of Oliver's sleeve as she quickened her pace to keep up with him. "The whole League-of-Assassins kinda sounds too R-rated for children."

"Their families train their children until they come of age — then they enter the official training halls and become full-fledged members of the League," he said, with a pinched set to his mouth. Hard to see why he didn't approve of the whole training-kids-to-become-soldiers thing.

Not for the first time since Oliver had started training Roy, Felicity wondered what his parenting style would be. The Oliver Queen billionaire-playboy persona was thankfully a thing of the past, and his depleted Queen assets meant that he wouldn't be raising trust fund kids any time soon, but still. Felicity hoped he wouldn't give his baby a set of sharpened knives for its first birthday. A Rubik's cube, maybe (Felicity's plan for her unfortunate future kid), but not sharp pointy objects.

She found it hard to believe that a philandering college-age Olly Queen wouldn't have had a girlfriend or two — even while dating Laurel and the whole Sara thing. Not his brightest moment as a human being, but…Felicity wondered. If, if, if — if he'd ever come close to the idea of kids.

"I was supposed to," he said, turning back to look at her, and Felicity knew she'd let her thoughts show too clearly. "But I wasn't ready."

"What?" she said.

He slowed so they were walking side by side, as if they were back in Starling and having a regular conversation out in the sunlight.

"There was a girl," he said, evenly. "I never told you. But it wasn't just Laurel, or Sara — there were others."

"Yeah, Oliver, the tabloids were very detailed," Felicity said dryly, recalling the sorority girls at MIT pasting Oliver Queen's picture on their list of (questionable) "Sex Gods". "…so were the girls at Sigma Kappa," she said, in an undertone.

Oliver paused to attach a bug to a corner wall, his hand brushing easily over the dark wall, as if he'd just reached out to catch his balance. He didn't say anything until they'd walked further along.

"No — I mean — there was this girl, once." Oliver said, in a different voice, as though he was surprised he was even bringing it up. "She told me she was pregnant. I was twenty-two, Laurel was talking to me about moving in together, and I wasn't ready."

"Oh." Felicity said, and chafed her arms, even though she wasn't cold. Fiddled with the embroidery at her elbow-length sleeves, the golden flowers stitched into the see-through fabric. Just to have something to do. She knew that it was best if she didn't say anything and let him say what he was comfortable with telling her. Or maybe she was just surprised that Oliver was actually volunteering information about his past — for once. But her tendency towards awkward babbling gained its usual supremacy.

"Since when do you over-share?" she asked, jokingly.

Oliver paused. "I don't know," he said, softly. "I guess I just want you to know…the things I don't
tell anyone. The things I thought I couldn't tell."

"Tell me," she said, dropping her voice to match his.

Oliver nodded, slowly. "I only ever told my mother. She didn't blame me — she never would — even though I deserved it, and more. But then the girl called me one night, and told me she'd lost the baby. So just like that — I was off the hook — free to be as stupid as I wanted." Oliver sighed, and stopped. They were in the shadow of a fountain, a cluster of rocks, hot water flowing from a seam in the stones.

Felicity didn't know whether he was thinking of Moira or the nameless, faceless girl, but she waited with him, standing side by side, two strangers at a fountain.

"I was her beautiful boy," he said, softly, staring down at the rippling water.

She could almost hear Moira Queen's ghost, rising from the water like mist, embracing her son and saying the words in his ear. My beautiful boy. Her beautiful boy.

Wordlessly, Felicity moved her hand from the folds of her shawl and slipped it into his. It wasn't something she would have done, because she never used to touch Oliver first, never initiated it — not after they'd hit pause on the whole thing.

It was a platonic touch, almost childish, with only the tops of her fingers enclosed by his immobile hand, their palms not even touching. Felicity was all right with that. It was Oliver's moment of silence, to remember his mother, a mother she knew he still grieved for. She just wanted him to know that he wasn't alone, just that.

But Oliver inhaled, slow and deep, and opened his hand suddenly. Felicity's fingers loosened in surprise, and – easily, naturally – slipped in between his open fingers. The line blurred between whose hand was whose, as curled fingertips rested on knuckles and the warmth of one palm spread to the other, a pulse against a pulse.

It didn't feel platonic, not anymore.

"I'm still not ready," he said, quietly.

Felicity leaned slightly to her left, letting the side of her head rest on Oliver's shoulder. She didn't say anything, not a light joke about Roy being good practice for fatherhood, or a serious question about the child that disappeared before he could find out for real — ready or not. No questions, no jokes. They weren't needed.

It was their little silence in the center of it all, their little moment of being themselves, surrounded by enemies, unnoticed by strangers. Oliver and Felicity.

But they had work to do. After a while, Felicity straightened up and gently brushed off his shoulder. Oliver cleared his throat, and he smoothed the folds of her shawl. Their hands had disengaged, but she didn't move away from him. He didn't move either.

"Let's go," she said, with a small smile.
The thought of Moira and Oliver's scenes makes me cry. I really miss her and Oliver, those maternal moments. I think I was reading something about that mystery kid of Oliver's and then Moira came up, and I just had to rewatch that episode and bawl. But yeah, another slow burn moment for you guys (at this rate I'm kinda worried slow burn is all I know and I'll jump the shark in some completely WTF way, but whatever, I'll worry about that). Cheers.
Felicity couldn't sleep. Whether it was the adrenaline from being out in the city, or too much restless energy from being cooped up in Nyssa's rooms (twenty-six hours in front of a computer screen), she paced the tatami mats barefoot, her clenching and unclenching her hands like she needed a stress ball.

Behind her, the system was combing through the available footage, assembling a list of names to match the crude footage gleaned from an extensive web of spying cameras. Felicity had glanced through a few matches and shuddered at the thought of what the CIA would do — or ARGUS — if they could see some of the individuals who worked for Ra's al Ghul.

The same dark woodgrains and red lanterns was rapidly driving her insane. Cabin-fever, deja vu, whatever. Felicity could practically hear the dysfunctionalism in her brain, and she rarely did — that was why she had such unfiltered verbal abilities. She idly tried one of the sliding doors, partly to see if it was locked, partly to find some place to go that wasn't a place she'd memorized from pacing.

It wasn't.

Like an Alice in her assassin-inhabited-Wonderland, Felicity wound her way through a maze of identical tatami-floored and wood-paneled rooms, leaving the doors open behind her so she could find her way back, her golden thread through the labyrinth.

"Oo," she said, sliding past the fifth door.

It was either a training room or a tasteful weapons exhibit, given the rows of displayed weapons — daggers as long as her forearm or as small as her finger, crossed swords that curved like wings, towering spears made entirely of bronze, chains of metal coiled into viper-like whips in the corner…

Curiosity…versus her thing about pointy objects.

Felicity felt like she had walked into a martial arts video game as she hefted an impressive black battle axe — or tried to, anyway. It was so heavy that she had to use both hands to keep it from falling on her foot and severing her toes.

Once she'd put it safely back on the wall, she bent to inspect a pair of wooden rods. They were about as long as her forearm and dark with shiny lacquer, reminding her of the ones Sara had used as the Canary. Felicity held one in either hand and struck her best invulnerable pose, arms out by her sides.

But in her tank top and baggy red trousers from earlier in the day, she just looked like a kid playing superhero with two rolling pins. With a sigh of resignation at her perpetual role as an extra in the fight scenes, Felicity flipped one of the sticks without thinking.

It missed her open hand and landed on her foot, sending a painful jolt all the way up her brain.

"Ow," she said, resisting the urge to roll onto the floor and hold the rapidly swelling bump on her foot. Instead, she sat down and breathed through her nose, moving her toes to check that she hadn't broken anything.

Part of her was thinking (very helpfully): God, so uncool. So many times uncool.
Irony: a dislike of pointy objects and a blunt object hammered her in the foot.

Thank God no one was around.

Then she heard the snort.

Felicity gingerly looked over her shoulder.

"Oh God," she said. "You saw."

Nyssa stepped into the room and scooped up the sticks from where she'd dropped them. "I saw," she said, tossing one in a tauntingly neat circle and catching it with one hand.

She cocked her head to the side, a gesture Felicity was rapidly becoming familiar with. "Why the weapons, Sa'ida?"

"Couldn't sleep," she admitted, sheepishly.

Nyssa raised an eyebrow. "Hm. And here I thought you had decided to take your learning into your own hands."

"Well, your weapons obviously aren't klutz-proof." Felicity gestured at the rapidly forming welt on her foot. "Besides, this isn't a karate movie — you can't turn me into a badass in a few days."

"Do you know nothing about defending yourself, then?" Nyssa asked, flatly.

"I pistol-whipped my deranged ex-boyfriend once," Felicity said, with an appropriate sense of rosy pride. "In front of Oliver, too."

From Nyssa's blank expression, Felicity wondered briefly if she had to demonstrate what pistol-whipping meant.

"Up," Nyssa ordered, so seriously that Felicity froze, eyes darting from Nyssa's face to the weapons in her hand.

"Uh," she said.

Nyssa strode over and hauled Felicity up by her elbows, planting her squarely on her two feet. Then she circled, unnervingly intense, and Felicity had to suppress the shiver that went up her spine from the appraisal.

She almost yelped when Nyssa handled her shoulders, then her forearms, holding out her wrists and fingers for inspection.

"Nimble hands," Nyssa said bluntly, "but stiff wrists from all the computers — strong shoulders — good. You'll need that strength."

"What?" Felicity said, but Nyssa's foot nudged her bare heel, making her stand like she was about to shoot a gun, planted feet.

"No one's ever told you that?" Nyssa said, sounding amused as she circled back to the wall.

"No," Felicity answered, wondering if she was supposed to feel bad. She resisted the urge to feel her own shoulders, because that would have been weird. Weirder than what was currently going on, but close second.
"A pity."

Felicity watched as Nyssa went to the wall and replaced the sticks, her elegant hands fanning out across the wood as she looked over the extensive collection of weapons.

Unsurprisingly, she glossed over the heavier maces and battle-axes and the long spears, as though she thought (accurately) that Felicity lacked both the grace and the strength to hold one without chopping off something vital.

The weapon Nyssa eventually selected was a little anti-climactic, just a short dagger, straight-bladed like a pared-down katana, with a smooth wooden hilt. She offered it by the hilt, and took one for herself.

"No woman should have to suffer at the hands of men," said Nyssa.

Felicity smoothed her flyaway hair behind one ear and looked down at the polished steel, at her reflection distorted by the gentle ripples in the metal, dark and unrecognizable. Since coming to Nanda Parbat and observing Nyssa, she'd seen how big an influence Nyssa al Ghul had exerted in the Sara Lance she'd met — the one who'd returned from the dead, the one who'd replaced half of her old self with the persona of the Canary. The one who'd left Oliver to save him from the darkness inside the both of them.

There was something dark about Nyssa, something dark she'd sensed in Sara that she was beginning to recognize in Nyssa — the ruthlessness, but the steel, blood and iron as well.

Did she want to let some of the darkness in?

There was plenty of darkness in Oliver, and light, too.

But this wasn't about Oliver. This was about her. Blood and iron didn't have to be darkness. There was a void inside her, somewhere, a void she'd wanted to fill with molten steel every time she saw Sara holding her own in a fight, every time she saw Oliver's back as he left the Foundry to fight the darkness in the streets.

Power and darkness, strength and light. Dig said that she was Oliver's hope, and Felicity wanted to be. If she was being completely honest, she didn't care who his hope was, she just wanted him to have it. She just wanted him to hold on to the light inside of him.

But if she was Oliver's hope, it didn't mean she had to sit passively by and radiate hopeful vibes. It meant that she'd be by his side, fighting for his soul — just like she said she would.

Felicity took the knife from Nyssa's open hand.

She was tired of being the one who got saved.

Chapter End Notes

This feels like a "fluff" chapter to me but I wanted Felicity to pick up some self-defence. She probably already has some, but not with weapons, I don't think. Still, so proud of her in 3.05 :)
Learn to Block

Felicity stifled a yawn over her breakfast, a bowl of butter tea and some yak cheese buns. Ever since Oliver had snuck back into the city to plant the bugs, she'd been in the back room, organizing the footage by location and combing through them for anything sketchy.

Mainly it was a lot of purposeful walking.

Nyssa made a few appearances with unfamiliar League members, hardly with anyone of her own age, keeping to the shadows as if she was deliberately trying to keep them in the dark about who she was meeting with.

But they eventually had to show up on camera.

With a glance at the closed door, located safely in front of her computer, Felicity pulled up the facial recognition software and skimmed through the results. She puffed out her cheeks at some of the names. They were still pretty impressive, as far as criminal records and origin stories went.

Felicity stretched her arms above her head and yawned. Her eyes alighted on the knife Nyssa had let her keep after their first (somewhat productive) training session. It had a fresh scratch in the hilt from when Felicity tried to throw it and let it fly out of her hand completely. It crashed into one of the many sharp edges on the weapons wall, hence the scratch.

Not her brightest moment, but at least she'd learned something. She went through a few of the exercises Nyssa had taught her to increase her core strength, which felt to her like doing air punches while holding her breath for as long as she could. Sure, she was wearing a tank top and yoga pants that she'd worn once, tops, but it was the thought that counted. The road to badassery was long, achieved one labored sit-up at a time.

It felt oddly good, though, to get her blood pumping, fresh oxygen into her lungs. But she slowed down after about fifteen minutes — easily her personal best — and called Roy.

"Miss me?" she asked, when the line finally connected.

A lot of rustling and grumbling, like Roy was trying to kick his way out of a blanket-burrito.

"You're kidding, right? It's six in the freaking morning — I'm going to kill you."

Felicity went back to doing air punches, swinging her upper body energetically and completely incorrectly.

"Well, I can put you in touch with a few options — very skilled, very geographically sensible — a few on the No-Fly List, a few with Terrorist alerts on them…should I go on?" she said, energetically.

Silence, and a tapping keyboard. She could imagine Roy pulling up the computer, probably from under a heap of discarded clothes. "It's live?" he said, groggily.

Felicity put her hands on her hips, out of breath. "You haven't been checking?"

"Kinda been keeping the cover — aid workers, remember?"

"Riiight, how's that going?" Felicity tried to imagine Roy teaching the local kids to use computers, and trying to explain what the Internet was through a Tibetan-language translator. Gold. She had to
drink some tea to stop herself from cracking.

"Dig's, like, a celebrity here. They keep calling him Kobe and asking him to dunk." Roy sounded vaguely jealous. "Oh — speak of the — hey, do you want to —?" His voice got further away and the line crackled as it changed hands.

"Hey Felicity," said Diggle, and she heard the keyboard noises start up again. "How's it going?"

"Good — I'm sending over the matched names. The League employs a lot more dead people than I thought," she said, bending to scroll through the substantial list of the missing and presumed dead.

"They're trained killers, all right, with or without the League," Diggle said, flatly. "You be careful."

"Please. You're talking to someone who spent the bulk of her high school career being invisible." Painful, but very true.

Diggle chuckled, a reassuring sound. "How's Oliver? You keeping an eye on him?"

Felicity sat down on the bed, her breath slowing. She rested an elbow on her thigh and scratched behind her ear as she thought about what to say. "It's pretty brutal, Dig," she said, quietly. "I only saw him train for a few hours and I don't know how he survived for a year. One of them uses poison in practice fights."

"Oliver's never been the type to recognize his limits." Diggle paused. "That being said, we're here now, and we're getting him out."

Felicity bit her lip. It was never a challenge to confide in Dig, but the confession she was about to make…it wasn't going to help anybody. It was only going to make things worse, the odds more insurmountable.

"Do you know what the Lazarus pits are?" she said, finally.

"Never heard. Why?"

Felicity filled him in, running through the bare skeleton of Nyssa's plan, including the blood sample and the role STAR Labs would have to play.

" — big, big, if," she said, in conclusion. While she'd been talking, the sweat had dried on the back of her neck and she had to chafe her arms against the coolness of the surrounding air.

"If they came up with a cure for the Mirakuru, they'll find something for this. The real problem is the blood sample. Felicity, I'm no scientist, but I don't think a few drops off the blade of a knife is gonna be enough."

"I know," Felicity said, into her hand. "So does Oliver. That's why we have to find another way, but I just can't see one. The second we get his blood, he'll be on to us."

"Draw him out. It worked on Slade."

"But that's all-out war, and Starling…" Starling City wouldn't survive another war. Not again. "And it's a huge risk. Even if we do get the sample, we'd still need time to run it to STAR Labs and work on the cure — even with Barry running full-speed — and what if there's no cure?"

There it was. Felicity saying all the things she couldn't tell Oliver, not yet. Not without a solution.

"I don't know, Felicity," said Diggle. "But all we can do is trust each other."
The door opened suddenly and Felicity's head jerked up. Oliver stood in the doorway, looking at her with a quizzical expression, taking in the clothes, the phone, the knife on the table. Not suspicion, not yet.

"Oo, speak of the Devil. Dig — Oliver's here," she said, dropping her worried expression and replacing it with something he'd be more likely to believe.

Then she handed the phone to Oliver and drank her (cold, ew) butter-tea-soup and worked on organizing the data with a bun in her mouth.

Felicity skimmed the new footage from the city. She lingered at the fountain for a minute, and glanced back at Oliver. He was talking to Dig and looked…almost happy. But Felicity was noticing his hands. They'd always been bigger than hers…except now they looked…different. She could almost tell where the uneven bumps were, the knots of muscle and tendon, on which finger and which knuckle, where there was a half-healed scar…because she'd held his hand. Through a glove, but still.

God, she could be creepy.

They hadn't talked about it since. But in a weird way, Felicity was okay with it. She knew Oliver, knew that he wasn't exactly of the touchy-feely variety, that his idea of a "talk" was meaningful silence, that his way of expressing hurt was in a single, flat, oh — and a sheepish look at the floor. She shook her head at his emotional constipation and scrolled through more footage.

"Hey," Oliver said, sliding the phone back across the table. "You all right?"

Felicity looked up in surprise. She hadn't heard him hang up — probably zoned out from focusing on the screen. "What — do I look weird?"

Oliver glanced at her clothes, and picked up the knife from the table, holding it up in a wordless question.

"Didn't know you'd gotten over your fear of pointy objects," he said, demonstrating that he had a knack for remembering the details.

"Not fear," Felicity corrected, hastily. "I just have a very vivid imagination — and pointy things stimulate said imagination to picture certain graphic deaths — but apparently blunt objects are equally terrible in the hands of klutzes, so I've adjusted my views accordingly."

Oliver looked like he was still waiting for her to answer his question. "Is Nyssa teaching you how to use it?"

"Yup." Felicity couldn't hide her pride.

"You could have asked me," he said, quietly.

Felicity glanced at the fresh bruises visible below his rolled-up sleeves, and stood up slowly, letting her fingertips linger on the edge of the table as she balanced herself. She was barefoot, and Oliver was too, like they were in the training room together.

"Asked you for permission to learn how to defend myself?" she asked, equally softly, "or asked you to teach me?"

Hurt flickered briefly behind his eyes, opened by the newfound edge to her words, gone in a fraction of a second. "You know which."
Felicity pinched the blade between finger and thumb, wordlessly sliding it back onto the table. "It was late," she said. "I couldn't sleep."

Oliver's breath stirred the top of her bowed head, and it took everything Felicity had to stay looking down, at the fine hairs standing at attention on her arms, at the beating pulse in her upturned wrist, at anywhere but Oliver.

"Hey," he said, and she felt him pick up her elbow, angle it in front of her body. "Let me show you how to block."

Felicity looked up at him in surprise. Oliver looked back, and she could see only seriousness in his eyes, like he'd weighed the fact that she was in Nanda Parbat and surrounded by death, that she was here because of him — any number of facts in his opaque thought process that had led him to the conclusion that she had to learn how to defend herself.

"Catch my arm and deflect," he said, showing her how to slide his arm off to the side. His foot nudged hers as he stepped into her space, miming an attack, a small shock she was careful to hide. "Be quick on your feet. Step in and aside."

Felicity repeated the action of deflecting his arm, but her feet carried her farther than she intended — a staggered footstep back. She brushed her hair back from her face and tried again, stepping in and aside, her arm sliding past Oliver's and flicking it away.

"Like that?" she asked.

"Like that," he answered, low and fierce.
They practiced in silence for a few more minutes, punctuated only by the whirring of the computers and their breathing. Frowning with concentration, Felicity tried to reduce all the distractions in her head to white noise, to focus on the physical task of defending herself. Oliver would move his arm, as though about to attack, and she would deflect it, with minimal force if she was doing it right.

Oliver had always been tall to her, but without shoes, it felt like he towered over her. Like his shoulders could make her feel claustrophobic if she stood between him and a wall. Felicity could feel the heat of him on her bare arms, his breath on her shoulder, how there he was.

"You're doing fine," Oliver said, as though he could sense her distraction. "The key is to keep repeating it until the deflection becomes second nature."

**Ha.** Ironic that Oliver — master of dodging — was teaching her how to make deflection an instinctive response.

"You never offered to teach me," she said, more of a comment than an accusation. Dig and Oliver made it look much easier than it was.

Oliver frowned. "I didn't ask you to join the team because I wanted you to fight."

"Right, I was the computer nerd." Felicity rolled her eyes and repeated the move, her arm sliding neatly around and off Oliver's. "God forbid I should use nunchucks."

Felicity was so jacked up on adrenaline that when Oliver's arm shifted in her peripheral vision, her arm jerked, the heel of her wrist shooting off-target and catching Oliver under the chin with a loud slap. He exhaled in surprise, touching the reddening spot under his jaw.

"Sorry!"

Oliver shook his head quickly, dropping his hand.

"If I'd taught you how to fight, it would have put me and Diggle out of a job," he said, with the faintest hint of a smile.

The computer sounded an alert, and Felicity broke away. She circled around the table, leaving the knife on the corner as she reached for the screen.

"Jade…Nguyen…" she read, on the right of the darkened image of a face — striking dark eyes flecked with gray, a long black braid, powerful Asian features…

**Cheshire.**

Wanted as a Freedom Fighter in several totalitarian dictatorships, wanted as a terrorist in the rest of the Free World.

"Uh — I think I found something. Not really a *something*, because it's not anything to do with the Big Plan, but kinda, because the person in question is — uh — of the super sketchy variety —"

"Felicity."

"Right."
Felicity slid into her seat and started to type.

Footage of Cheshire started to pile up on the screen, a few nights' worth on the same set of cameras, each time slinking out of frame. Felicity's fingers flew across the keyboard as she flicked through possible routes she could have taken, like it was Oliver on a motorcycle and she was chasing him through the Starling City traffic cameras.

Behind her, she sensed that Oliver had sat down and was watching her work. It took longer than she was used to, but she found Cheshire — eventually. Away from the fountain — behind the market — a darkened back alley. The time-stamp showed that it was 3:38 in the morning. Obviously not a social visit, then. She zoomed in on the picture, supplementing it with different angles to show the whole scene. It was a row of neglected houses with burned-out lanterns, strewn with broken wagons and overturned empty crates.

Basically, a stereotypically sketchy place. Felicity ran through the night before, and the night before that. Same time. Same person.

She rewound the footage and played it again, showing Cheshire walking through the abandoned back street and into a house that looked like it'd seen better days. Or actual living people. Oliver sat behind her on the bed and peered at the screen with his usual stony expression.

After playing the three consecutive days, Felicity turned to face Oliver. "Why's Cheshire going into the city at three in the morning? I thought all assassins lived here. Like in the tunnels."

"They do," he said, not taking his eyes off the screen, at the facial recognition program Felicity was running on the brief but enhanced shot of Cheshire's face. "I know that area of town. The houses were used by the League for storing supplies, until they moved it all in here."

"Okay, so if they're empty then she has no reason to be there. Does she work for anyone?"

"Nyssa," he said, flatly.

"Oh." She turned back to the screen. "Do you think —?"

"We can't know for sure."

"But if Nyssa sent her, she would have told us what for."

Oliver gave her a look. "How much do you think Nyssa actually tells us?"

Felicity gave him one right back. "I don't know, Oliver, but the alternative is telling her that Cheshire is running her own little drug den in the basement of a warehouse."

"Keep watching her," he said, getting to his feet. "I have to be in the arena."

"With Ra's?" Felicity said, and he stopped, halfway to the door. She got up hastily, almost tripping over the table. "Oliver — don't push yourself, okay?"

Felicity had been so busy with the surveillance footage that she hadn't had time to watch Oliver in the arena, and she had a feeling that he didn't mind at all. He turned now to look back at her.

"I have to get his blood," he said, levelly. "So you can take it back with you."

The other elephant in the room. Now that most of the cameras were up and running, there was no real reason for Felicity to stay — from Oliver's point of view anyway. The real logical thing they
were meant to tackle next was getting that blood sample and sending Felicity back to Roy and Dig, then back to Starling.

"We still haven't bugged Ra's' chambers," she said, almost defiantly.

Oliver inclined his head. "I'm working on it," he said, and walked out. The door closed with a gentle tug of air, and it sent the knife on the table spinning in a lazy circle, until Felicity reached out to still it with the tip of her finger.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oliver knew he was there.

It was an alchemic response by his body to a threat, the cold steel that gathered in his limbs, the calm that descended on his wits, as though every fiber of his being was still actively trying to defy Ra's' and defy the rage that hissed inside him.

As he fought Kirigi, Onyx, Cheshire — the other League members in the pit — he felt nothing but coldness. Even though his body took abuse from their weapons and he traded blows with ferocity, it was calm and measured, lacking the rage he supposedly needed. He was an aimed arrow, trained on a single point — a single target.

He would defeat Ra's al Ghul.

But he needed his blood first.

Before the day's training, Nyssa had shot Oliver a brief look — lacking for that single moment the unconcern and opacity she presented to observing eyes — a glimpse of black fire that reminded him exactly why he was here, and what he was fighting for.

Felicity, Diggle, Roy — all waiting for him to finish this. He could get them all away from here. Just with Ra's' blood.

Oliver perceived everything with sudden ruthless clarity. Ra's would descend in anger and teach Oliver a lesson. Hammer him to the breaking point, force him to the edge and dig the tip of his blade into his throat, just so that he could be the one who caused Oliver's control to shatter.

So Oliver sparred calmly, methodically, knowing that his control would only anger Ra's until he could stand it no longer.

But then he sent in someone else.

Nyssa took the arena, her eyes black with a kind of fury only Oliver recognized — her resentment at being summoned to do her father's bidding, to fight like a directed marionette.

But they both knew how to keep up appearances. Oliver mirrored her stance, planting the staff on the ground, and looking towards her father — who watched from the balcony above.

They bowed.

"Begin," said Ra's, with a downward sweep of his hand.

It was a test, but Oliver didn't know what it was. Nyssa was as proficient with a Bo staff as she was with any other weapon, which meant that she could beat him if he didn't stay present. Sweat slid off his body, stinging as they glided over scrapes, but he watched Nyssa. Her face was a mask, the one she wore when she fought like the Demon's Heir.

Their staffs met with a resounding crash. Nyssa hurled him off with surprising force and swung the staff at his head — but stopped just shy of it.
"One-zero," she said curtly, and he realized that she'd known all along that they were playing for points.

She withdrew, twirling the staff back to her side, as though to reset their positions. Oliver looked up at Ra's, whose mouth had curved into a smile of cruel pride.

Oliver felt his vision pulse with anger. At the fact that they were being asked to fight like trained monkeys. At the fact that Ra's was still playing games with him.

Oliver shook his head and reverted to his original stance. He couldn't let his anger work against him, not when the Demon was the one he wanted to draw out.

Nyssa's jaw clenched and she brought the staff down. Oliver leapt aside and swung the staff towards her side. She knocked him off-course but he pushed, forcing her to retreat, and pressed his advantage. He caught the staff and forced her arm up — the butt of the Bo staff stopping just short of her ribs, a blow that would have fractured bone just as surely as her blow would have cracked his skull open.

"One-one," he said.

And on it went.

They were neck-in-neck, each gaining a point as soon as they'd lost one, with no clear ending in sight. The spectators had begun to react whenever either of them pulled an impressive move, but only Ra's never called off the match.

What is he trying to prove?

Oliver's back stung with the mingling of blood and sweat, but he continued to fight. Finally, he brought the staff down with enough force to crack Nyssa's down the middle. Her nostrils flared with anger, and Nyssa hurled him off — causing the wood to splinter completely. Contemptuously, she tossed the pieces aside and said something over her shoulder.

A bow and a quiver of arrows landed in the sand behind Oliver. Nyssa was already picking hers up, slinging the arrows across her shoulder and loading an arrow into her bow.

Oliver only stared at her.

They were allies — weren't they? It was hard to tell when he sensed the anger in her, the rage that crackled in the air.

"Pick up your weapon, Oliver Queen," she said.

"I'm not going to shoot you," he said, holding the staff by his side.

The arena murmured. Nyssa rolled her eyes — and shot him.

Oliver tasted salt and sand, his hearing drowned by the sound of his own blood rushing from his body. He hauled himself up, survival instincts kicking in, and gripped the wooden shaft in his slick fist. There was a risk the arrowhead would be stuck inside the wound, but Oliver didn't want it tearing at him as he fought. It would have to be quick and painful.

Gritting his teeth, he yanked. The arrow rent through muscle with a soft squelch, and Oliver threw it
to the side as a narrow rivulet of blood made its way down his shoulder. The adrenaline was stopping him from feeling the pain, but that wouldn't last for long.

A bowstring drew taut behind him.

Oliver lunged for the bow. He rolled out of the way, sending up a spray of sand between them, spun with an arrow loaded — and fired back.

Nyssa swerved, and the arrow hit wood instead of flesh. She circled and shot again. Oliver shot back, and his arrow cut hers in two.

Sparks showered the ground from the broken arrowheads, and her lips curled wickedly at the humor of it. But they were still enemies in the arena, and they fired as if to kill.

"Enough," said Ra's.

Nyssa bowed, holding her bow out by her side. Oliver did the same, kneeling in the sand. The ground around them was littered with broken arrowheads, and their bows were notched with gouges, from being crossed like blades.

"Father — has this *exhibition* pleased you?" Nyssa asked, lifting her head.

Without speaking, Ra's drew his hands together and clapped, and soon the rest of the arena followed. It was a cacophony of discordant mirth, a savage display of joy at a near-fight to the death.

"I think we have all seen what needs to be seen," said Ra's. "That my daughter has met her match in Oliver Queen."

Oliver's head jerked up. He didn't like the sound of that at all, and from the way Nyssa's knuckles were clenched around the shaft of her weapon, neither did she.

But Ra's only looked at them with his inscrutable black eyes and they could only guess what he was planning.

Chapter End Notes

Return of the Oliver abuse. Bwahahaha. Side note: wrote this while listening to the Pacific Rim OST. The other chapters were the Mockingjay Part 1 OST. More to come soon.
"Ow," said Oliver.

Felicity's hand was shaking so badly that the alcohol slopped right into the entry wound and pooled there. Oliver grimaced, and Felicity saw — but she was too angry to apologize.

"You shot him?" she snapped, glaring at Nyssa — who paced the floor in front of them, twirling her sword in one hand as if to ward off accusations like Felicity's.

"Be quiet." The sword sliced through the air with a sound that made them all wince. With a contemptuous noise Nyssa continued to pace, furiously, like a caged lioness.

"We're supposed to be allies," Felicity said, letting every ounce of betrayal she felt seep into her words. "That means you don't shoot him."

"My father always gets what he wants." The blade shook with anger. "His summons will come — soon — but I begin to see why Sara was such a hindrance to him." She laughed, and it was the sound of broken glass.

Felicity turned back to Oliver's wound and made a face as the alcohol dripped out pink from the puncture.

"It's just speculation," Oliver said, sounding very tired. "You don't know what your father wants."

"You stupid little man!" Nyssa snarled. "Do I have to spell it out for you? Two women do not make an heir. My father calls me the Demon's Heir, but I have always been the temporary placeholder for a son he never had." Her sword flashed silver and a lantern crashed to the floor in pieces. "First it was the one from Gotham — now it is the one from Starling. I thought he was done sending me suitors like I was a princess in a damned story — but apparently not." She spun away, and black ash from the lantern streaked the floor around her like a scorch trail.

Felicity was stunned by the fury in Nyssa's voice, and she silently exchanged a glance with Oliver. Even though he looked tired, his blue eyes were still sharp and present. He nodded, minutely. Her hands still sticky with his blood, she got up and bridged the distance between them and Nyssa. There was ash streaking the floor, and grit that clung to her bare feet, but Felicity ignored it.

"If that's true," Felicity said, slow and careful. "It's not your fault."

Nyssa spun around, holding up her hand between her and Felicity, as if to stop her from moving any closer. "I don't care," she said, flatly. The tapered fingers were very still. "Because it is enough that Sara died. It is enough that Sara was killed because of her association with me. It is enough — that this was one of his misguided attempts to render me more amenable to a marriage I have no interest in. But no — I will kill my father, one way or the other, because he ignored the truth — the love I had for her. Because he chose to murder the light in her soul and the light it brought out in mine."

A tear tracked its way down the side of her face, but the her expression was still as a stone carving, and as unforgiving as one. When she spoke again, it wasn't to Felicity, or Oliver, or anyone. She was only thinking aloud, detached and calm — her fury smoothed away like wrinkles from a wadded-up cloth. "He leaves me in the darkness alone, and I will take him with me, one way or another."
The tear quivered on the edge of her jaw and fell away, unnoticed. She inhaled, deeply.

"Rest assured, Oliver Queen, that when he summons us for the wedding feast, I will draw my dagger and I will kill him in front of his precious League." She blinked, and stared at them with sudden clarity. "But I know that there is nothing you can do to get his blood, not now. There will have to be war. At least if he thinks I am docile, I may have a chance to fire the proverbial first shot."

Nyssa shoved the sword back into her scabbard and walked towards the door.

"Nyssa," said Oliver, grimacing as he hauled himself upright. "You're not thinking straight. You can't start a war with Ra's al Ghul. He'll kill us all."

"Sa'ida —" Nyssa looked over her shoulder with a small, challenging smile. "You may return to the village and back to Starling. Thank you for your service."

"You're not seriously going to marry her, right?" Felicity said, pressing wadded-up gauze into the dark puncture wound. She wiped her forehead, leaving a smear of red behind. "Is it even official if the League does it?"

"I don't know," he said, dully. "I'm more worried about what she thinks war will accomplish."

"She's just angry. She'll calm down — I think."

"If not, I'll send you the wedding photos," Oliver said, unsmiling.

"If it's anything like the Red Wedding — no thanks," Felicity muttered, tearing off a piece of tape.

"The what?"

"You've been back from the island for four years."

Oliver stared at the wall distractedly, resting his elbows on the polished table. She didn't like that look at all.

"Oliver…" she began.

"I can probably figure out the facial recognition on my own, but you're going to have to give it some sort of password only I can access." He scrubbed his hand across his face tiredly. "Then there's getting out of the village, but —"

"— Oliver. I'm not going back," Felicity said, sitting back on her heels, the surgical tape forgotten in her hands. "The village, yeah, but that doesn't mean Starling."

His brows contracted. "You're not staying here."

"We haven't exactly finished this." She gestured at the bloody bits of bandage and gauze littering the table, the ash and broken lantern on the floor, the computers whirring in the back room.

"Diggle will —"

"Diggle knows exactly what I'm willing and capable of doing, and surprise, surprise, he's on board with it. We're all staying, even if it means we have to teach the village how to use their Thinkpads for a year. When you walk out of Nanda Parbat and into the sun, we will be there waiting for you at the doorstep. So don't," Felicity said, with a small shake of her head.
Oliver only stared at her, resting his chin on his closed fists. He seemed about to say something, but it would only be a rehash of their arguments and what they already knew about each other. She would try to save his soul, and he would try to shield her from the nuclear explosion he seemed to think was inevitable.

Instead, he said: "I want to show you something."

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys - so I've basically been writing all weekend. This morning I opened the curtains and sunlight was streaming through so I immediately closed them again and went back to my computer. Writing is better than the stupid sun.
Felicity's fingers banged rough stone on her way up a sloping tunnel. Even though she passed torches at every interval, there was something very dark about the path they were taking, like no amount of light would ever make it...bright.

But she knew that asking Oliver wouldn't make much of a difference. To be up and on his feet again with a wound like that...Felicity knew it had to be important enough for him to show her.

The cold whispers made the hair on her arms prickle, the bones in her face shiver, as if there were disembodied hands gliding across her skin, murmuring in her ear. Felicity focused on a point between Oliver's shoulders, and breathed slowly, deeply.

When he stopped, she did too. Felicity could barely see over the top of his shoulder, and she looked up at Oliver. His jaw was set, his fingers clenching and unclenching out of fists — he was steeling himself to do something.

"Oliver —" Felicity touched his arm lightly, just a brush. "What is it?"

"Sorry," he said, starting like he had forgotten she was there. He moved aside, his arm going behind Felicity as if to steer her inside.

With her line of vision unimpeded, Felicity took a step inside anyway. Whether it was out of pure curiosity, or just something at the back of her mind that wanted her to go in, she didn't know. Her head went back as she traced the ragged edges of the cavern ceiling. A black iron chain, clanging softly as a blood-red lantern swayed from it, the pool of eerie light extending...down.

"Oh," Felicity said. "Oh."

Her head flicked towards Oliver in surprise. "You're showing me the pit? Why?"

Oliver opened his mouth as if to answer. But whatever he said was drowned out by the sudden scream of wind that tore at Felicity's back, at the folds of her robes, at her loose hair —

Felicity reached blindly for Oliver where she knew he'd be, by her side. But it was still a surprise when his fingers grazed hers, arms and elbows knocking, as if he'd instinctively reached for her too. She felt the warmth of his body against her side and the unevenness of his ribs beneath her palm — shifting, as he turned towards her completely, his shoulders hunched as if to shield her from the wind. Felicity was suddenly conscious of the fact that Oliver's heartbeat thumped against her forehead, and that his hands were open and against her spine...the fact that they'd reached for each other without thought — just burning in her mind as the wind shrieked and raged around them.

Oliver shifted his leg, and a shower of dust cascaded into the shadows. Beside him, Felicity pushed her hair behind her ears and peered over the edge, frowning in concentration. He flexed his fingers, fighting the urge to hold her by the elbow to keep her from falling in.

"I can hear them," she said. "Voices."

He nodded, knowing better than to ask who she could hear. "Inside the pit, you see things too."
"Call me a nerd," said Felicity, crouched near the ledge, "but based on climate and atmosphere alone, I've ruled out most of the known hallucinogenic compounds in FDA database." She'd pulled out her tablet at some point and was tapping her fingers against the glowing screen, visibly thinking. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I wish you had more experience in drugs so you could tell me what this is."

Oliver gave her a look. "I was a frat boy."

"You know — oddly — I don't think magic mushrooms grow down in the Wonderland tunnel." Felicity flinched, and lowered her computer sheepishly. "Sorry. Did you want me to do an analysis of the compound, because I'm pretty sure I could get Fed-Ex up to the village and —"

"Felicity," he said. "I don't care about Fed-Ex."

"Don't let them hear you say that," she muttered.

Oliver laughed quietly, and shook his head. He paused, reveling in the wonder of it. He never thought he would ever smile just thinking about the pit, much less sitting at the edge of it and laughing. But that was it — calculated risks and carefully-concealed truths somehow always lost out with Felicity, because she always managed to surprise him.

"I don't know — honestly — if Nyssa's going to win. I don't know how much longer I'll have to be with the League, or what I'm going to have to sacrifice to get there —" He shook his head when Felicity tried to interrupt. "— No, I have to tell you this. I fought everybody I'd ever met in the pit — but you were the only person who never hurt me. Then I saw you die, and I held you as you did."

Felicity was silent, looking up at him with concern — like it was just another night in the Foundry and she was waiting for him to tell her what was on his mind.

"That's why I didn't want you in Nanda Parbat, that's why I never wanted any of this to involve you," he said, in a rush.

"So why'd you bring me here?" she asked, quietly.

"I guess I just wanted you to stand here," said Oliver, "and prove my fears wrong."

Felicity cupped her cheek in her hand. "You know, when you get all gooey and romantic like that, it's really hard for me to remember that you just told me I died in your head."

Oliver smiled and said nothing. Abruptly serious, Felicity bit her lip and got slowly to her feet, brushing off the dust that clung to her legs. "But don't die, okay? When this is all over — it's your turn to stand outside Nanda Parbat and prove my fears wrong."

They were suddenly very close, and Oliver — in a brief, exquisite moment of decision — knew what he would have done, to show Felicity that he meant it. That his mind understood there would be a sacrifice in taking down Ra's al Ghul, but that his heart wanted so very badly to promise her that he would come back alive.

He raised his hand to her chin, and with a kind of gentleness that came so easily with her, tilted her face towards him. She let him.

Felicity’s wide eyes traced their way down his face, slowly, stopping at his mouth. Her lips parted slightly and he felt the shiver of her breath across his jaw, the anchor of his fingertips against her cheek.
But then her tablet buzzed, clattering to the ground with a noise that made them both jump. Felicity bent to pick it up, and he heard her gasp.

"Crap," she said, as the smirking face of Jade Nguyen came up onscreen, beside the grainy footage of her walking down the row of houses. But this time she had a squirming sack over her shoulder, and as they watched, a tiny flailing hand fought its way free of the bag and grasped blindly at the air.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: it's going to get weird from here. Also - I know when they're going to kiss and it'll be unexpected. Or you can hunt me down and kill me for cutting short another one of their moments.
Visitors

Chapter Notes

Catching up with Diggle and Roy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Diggle sat in the shadow of the satellite with his computer balanced on his lap, finishing off an email to Lyla. Calls were difficult to manage when they were both out of Starling, and with her being on ARGUS business, timezone-wise it could mean Beijing or Zimbabwe or Helsinki.

It was never going to be easy, managing their very different jobs, but with Sara waiting for them both at home, it reminded them that they didn't always need to be at war for something to work.

The sun was warm on the back of his head and neck, on the roof tiles beneath his legs. He found that the signal worked best if he sat on the roof to use the Internet, and he only went back in if Felicity called and he didn't want to be overheard. Sending off the message, he logged back into the surveillance program and ran through the fresh matches, fresh names added to their database — all because of a certain genius programmer, hiding somewhere inside the craggy mountain ridge that cast long shadows across the village at sunset.

Hearing shouting, he looked over his computer screen and down to the street below. A bunch of local kids ran by Team Arrow's safe house, waving at him and yelling greetings on their way to play in the fields.

Diggle watched in amusement as they stopped briefly at their door to pick up another partner-in-crime, a certain Roy Harper who could still act like a teenager when it came to playing games with the local children. Roy was still wearing that red hoodie, which made him stick out amongst the green field grass and brown homespun like an out-of-place maple leaf, bobbing and weaving in a Tibetan variation of tag.

With another thoughtful glance at the mountains dominating the skyline above the village, Diggle went back to work.

Roy banged up the staircase and caught the edge of the door as he swung into the safe house, stamping the dust off his sneakers and shaking the bits of grass from his hair and clothes.

"Hey," he said to Diggle, stripping off his hoodie and crossing over to the table.

Diggle was eating with the computer open in front of him. "Fun times?" he said, and pushed the plate of dumplings towards Roy.

Roy ignored the chopsticks and popped the dumplings straight into his mouth by hand, ignoring the fact that they were hot enough to burn his tongue. The chili would kick in and numb the inside of his mouth anyway. He was getting used to the village food — after a few unfortunate taste-tests with stewed sheep's heads (eyeballs still in) and blood sausage (exactly what it sounded like) — and they'd both reached a consensus that anything that was stuffed bread/dumplings/pastry was good to eat.
"So hungry," Roy said, through a mouthful of spicy beef and cabbage. "What have you been up to?"

"Trying to classify League members into Alert-level categories. I asked Felicity to cross-reference them with ARGUS's so we can get some idea of what we're dealing with," Diggle sighed. "She's the only one smart enough to hack them without getting noticed."

Roy raised his eyebrows. "Beats my morning. I managed to steal a kid's pretend-horse, but then he whacked me in the shin with a branch." He swallowed and reached for some barley beer, but Diggle shifted it out of his reach and pushed tea towards him instead, all without looking up from his computer.

"Still underage," said Diggle, typing.

"No drinking age in Tibet," Roy answered. "Google."

"Nice try. Felicity gave me strict instructions to keep you away from the booze."

Roy did a double-take. "She said that?"

"No — but it seems like something she and Oliver would agree on," Diggle said musingly.

"I wonder if they're fighting," Roy said, remembering the last time Felicity called.

"You wanna make things interesting?" Diggle looked at him speculatively. "Ten bucks that by the time they walk out of Nanda Parbat, they'll be together."

"Wait," said Roy. "I'm not betting against them. You bet against them."

Diggle gave him a look. "What exactly do you think I've been trying to do for the last three years? Help them see other people?"

"Well I'm not betting against them, so I guess neither one of us is getting anything," Roy grabbed another dumpling and crossed his arms while he chewed.

"Shame," said Diggle, turning back to his computer. But it had frozen. He tapped on the keyboard a few times. Impossible — the way Felicity programmed the computers, it would take the technological equivalent of a concrete building to bring the system down.

Roy had come around to the back of Diggle's chair, suggesting Ctrl-Alt-Delete — which had zero effect. Except to send the screen blinking with dozens of orange windows that all said the same thing — their geographical perimeter had been breached by persons on the Alert roster. Military extremists, international terrorists, gangs, known criminals they'd encountered in the past…and ARGUS.

"No, no, no," said Diggle, reaching for his phone.

Roy watched as Diggle's calls to Felicity went unanswered, his dismay quickly tamped down by the training — to assess the situation and respond. There was no way ARGUS had followed them all the way to Tibet, none of them were valuable enough for that. Except Oliver — but he’d been gone for a year, and they’d been to weirder places searching for him during that time, and ARGUS had never shown up.

"They'll be here in two hours — tops," said Diggle, laying the phone flat on the table with surprising calm. He rested his chin on his fists, thinking. "The smart thing to do would be to clear out before
they even get here."

His tone suggested otherwise.

"We can't leave without them," said Roy, very much stating the obvious. But it needed to be said — a reminder of why they were there.

"No," Diggle agreed. "But maybe we can find out what ARGUS wants."

Nightfall brought the convoy of unmarked ARGUS vehicles to the outskirts of the tiny village. Amanda Waller stepped from her car and into the dust-swept shadows with the first team of armed guards. They poured out ahead of her, in full armed-response gear, sweeping the tall grass and the first buildings for any sign of hostiles. But it was only a precaution. They'd had the place under surveillance for a while.

The lights had been snuffed out in the houses, and only a relative few remained lit, a reminder that the rural Tibetan village was not inhabited solely by ghosts.

Waller cut an imposing profile, despite her youth and the fact that she was dressed as if it was just a regular day in the ARGUS strategy room, inhospitable terrain or not. Her breath turned silver in the frigid air while she waited for her people to join her. Waller's keen eyes adjusted rapidly to the low light, filling the spaces with her recollection of the village layout. New satellite in the town center, the dusty van parked between two houses, the jagged mountain ridge overlooking the village. Factors combined that set off their net of delicate triggers in the manhunt for some of the world's most dangerous criminals.

She barely turned when her aide appeared at her elbow, shivering in the cold.

"Ma'am, we have intelligence that John Diggle and a Roy Harper are in the village, fifth house to the left. Should we engage?"

"Leave them to me," she said coolly, and walked towards the remaining lights in the village.

Chapter End Notes

Amanda Waller scares me, and maybe that shows. But yeah, she's going to shake things up and be VERY inconvenient in terms of what's going to happen with Oliver and Felicity.
"Just FYI, this is not how I imagined celebrating your engagement," Felicity said, brushing straw from her shoulder.

Oliver rolled his eyes and peered around the corner. He'd been quiet for most of the trip, focusing on navigating their way around the crush of people. Nanda Parbat at night was something she hadn't seen before, but according to Oliver, there were guards stationed on the rooftops after curfew, which meant that they had to go while the city was still alive with activity.

They'd made it through the marketplace and the busier streets, and it was just the matter of finding that back street — and trying to get in without Cheshire noticing.

"There it is," he said suddenly, putting an arm out to catch her before she stepped out beyond the wall.

Felicity ran right into it. "Oof," she said, and shrank back to the shadow of the wall. She pulled out her tablet and ran a scan for Cheshire in the facial recognition systems.

"Do you know which door it is?" she asked, while they waited for confirmation that Cheshire wasn't still in there.

Oliver leaned back against the wall and nodded. "The one with the red paint on the door," he said.

Felicity peeked around the wall. The row of squat, two-story houses all looked similar, and she was momentarily distracted by the jumble of trash and discarded items lying around the street, from broken wagons to refuse of debatable organic nature, and the mewing stray cats that prowled the miniature junkyard like it was their kingdom. But she eventually found the door, white lintel chipped and warped, a dusty smear of red down the wood boards.

"That's ominous," she commented, turning back to her screen. The scan was still running. "When was the last time you had your rabies shot?"

"They won't attack us," he said. "If Cheshire walks by them every night, they'll be used to humans by now. Stray cats can be noisy — she probably chose the place as a precaution."

Felicity gave him a look.

"I've always liked cats, actually," said Oliver, matter-of-factly, transferring his bow from his back to his hand. "They have an ingrained sense of self-preservation."

Felicity quietly resolved to claim her week's worth of Big Belly from Dig when she saw him again (they had a running bet over Oliver's dog/cat preference, a toss-up, really).

"Self-preservation," she repeated, sarcastically. "Which you don't seem to have."

"Irrelevant," Oliver said, glancing over at her. "Cats need you to earn their loyalty. With dogs — it's a question of loyalty or submissiveness."

He shrugged and looked around the wall again, leaving her to wonder (inappropriately) if Oliver actually cared more about the subject of pets than he let on.

She watched as he licked his lips, and flushed at the brief (and highly inappropriate, given the
Timing. Whatever that was, they really needed some.

_Felicity,_ she told herself firmly, _if he ever gets his thick head back to Starling City, you'll get him a cat for the Foundry. Then you worry about timing._

The scan found what it was meant to.

"Bingo," she said, shaking her head to clear it. "Cheshire's back with the League. With…Nyssa, actually."

Oliver watched impassively as she turned the tablet over to show the two women standing on the city walls, on the other end of Nanda Parbat. Probably because Nyssa had perfect memory of where the bugs were, they'd chosen to stand as far out of range as possible, which sucked for Felicity's ability to lip-read.

"Do you think they're in on it? Together?" she asked.

Oliver stood, slipping an arrow from his quiver. "One way to find out."

Felicity gripped the knife Nyssa had given her as they advanced on the house. The cats largely ignored them, only a few hissing or turning their heads to look at her with glowing eyes. Oliver walked silently, slipping around the ungainly debris in the street like he was imitating Cheshire from the footage — minus the squirming kidnapped kid in a sack.

She (obviously) had a little less luck, the corner of her robe catching the broken edge of a wheel and making it spin squeakily, like a merry-go-round in need of repair. But Oliver didn't use the door. Apparently that was rule number one of breaking and entering. He got them both up to the roof and swung over the side to displace a pane of dusty glass in a side window.

"Give your eyes time to adjust," Oliver said, balanced perfectly on the ledge of the window. He handed her the wire, which was somehow meant to hold her weight as she went through.

Felicity gripped the wire with both hands, meeting his steady gaze with something resembling calm.

Which was really _holy-crap-there-could-be-anything-in-there._

Felicity unconsciously sucked in her breath as Oliver disappeared through the window, before following him into the dark.

The shadows inside the house felt oddly — damp. Felicity landed, overcorrecting into Oliver's side. He caught her and she felt his hand, a solid warm weight, rest on the side of her neck. Five pulse-beats later, they straightened up in the gloom. The faint lights from the watch fires filtered through the filthy windows like amber moonlight, cutting eerie twisted shadows through the dusty air. They were on some kind of second-floor ledge that overlooked the large empty space of the ground floor, with a few overturned and empty crates serving as skeletons of its previous use. The dozens of dark chains hanging from the ceiling — that was another story, because she had no idea what they were for. But given the individual who frequented it most — she didn't think it could be good.

They took a concrete staircase down to ground level, and as they circled the dusty walls and single exit, it became apparent that there was nothing else. Felicity stood by a crate as Oliver prowled the floor, tapping her computer as she tried to imagine any secret exits. Pulling one of the chains would be a highly childish option — an idea completely based off her knowledge of cartoons — but using
the house as a temporary drop point also seemed like a likely possibility.

Still, since Cheshire had only been here a few hours before, and if there was anybody else coming to pick up the kid they'd seen, Felicity would have caught it on the surveillance.

Which really only left a few ominous options — that Cheshire kept the kid (or kids) somewhere in the building (underground, by her guess), and if she visited them almost once a day, it would mean that she'd need someone to feed and more importantly, make sure that none of the kids got out.

But surely, if there was someone watching the building for Cheshire, they would have attacked intruders by now?

Felicity flinched as one of the chains abruptly slapped her on the side of the head, showering rust onto her neck. She brushed it away impatiently, like it was a cat's tail flicking across her face — and stopped.

She didn't need to look up to know that something was moving in the darkness, shifting the chains above their heads. Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed the knife and held it by her side as she crept around the crate to find Oliver.

"Oliver," she whispered. "Oliver!"
Felicity knew they were coming before they appeared. It was the sudden tension, the split-second rush of air displaced by a falling body —

_Thud._

Felicity ducked instinctively as a burly set of arms closed above her head, arms that would definitely have broken her neck or caught her in a chokehold if she hadn't moved.

She fell forward on her palms, but her head whipped around to look at the massive shape looming above her. Regular Oliver would have swiped at his legs or something, but Felicity didn't trust her aim. Instead, her feet found the side of the crate and she kicked off of it, sliding out of range from her attacker.

Further away, she saw that the attacker was smaller than she'd thought. He was built large, but lacking the kind of definition from someone with real training — like he was still growing.

_A teenager?_

The knife he had in his hand was _definitely_ not. He hefted it, bracing to throw, and Felicity scrambled to her feet —

A second later, it wasn't there anymore, but lying on the ground, blood dripping dark onto the blade. Felicity's eyes focused on the arrow, one that protruded suddenly from the boy's wrist.

"I missed," said Oliver, and slammed his bow into the side of the kid's head.

Before the kid even blacked out, another shape jumped onto Oliver's back. Felicity spun around on instinct and saw the arm flying out towards her. Before she even experienced conscious thought, her arm swung up to meet it, deflecting it off to the side. Unfortunately, she forgot that she had a knife in her hand so it tore into skin and struck bone with enough force to make her whole body jerk.

Her attacker rolled onto the ground, clutching his arm and howling in what sounded like Russian. She didn't even have to drop the knife, the handle was so slick that it slithered out of her grasp anyway.

A grunt roused her from the blanched shock at what she'd just done, and she turned towards the sound — just as an arrow shot across the room and exploded into wires that zipped across the kid's chest, pinning him to the wall. Oliver was on the ground, his chest heaving. He got up, slowly, his left arm hanging limp by his side.

Felicity gently put her hand on his back, turning her face up to his in a wordless question. Oliver shook his head, visibly quieting his breathing, and they both turned to the pinioned boy. He couldn't have been more than sixteen years old, Asian, and as baby-faced as Barry when she first met him, but he was built like an amateur wrestler.

"Where's she keeping them?" he growled, in the standard Arrow voice she realized she hadn't heard in a long time.
The kid said something in Mandarin, and Oliver responded just as fluently. The boy spat at them and turned his head aside. Oliver gritted his teeth.

"Where's the other one?" he asked.

Felicity pointed vaguely towards the crates, a little dizzy at the thought of the dripping knife she'd stuck into actual living flesh. Gag. Reflex.

"Felicity," said Oliver, kneeling by the boy. "He needs help."

Oliver sliced through the boy's sleeve one-handedly, while his other arm rebelled with spidery jolts of pain every time he tried to use it. The arrow wound was open and bleeding again; one of his gloves was filling steadily with blood seeping from shoulder to fingertip.

"Felicity — could you…?" he said, through gritted teeth.

Felicity nodded silently, reflexively tucking her hair behind her ears even though it was held back in a braid. Her hands — bloodstained, always bloodstained because of him — left sticky reddish-brown streaks at her temples, sending a pang of guilt to his gut.

He wouldn't have asked her if he could have done it himself. He knew how the boy had gotten the deep cut — inexperienced and accidental — one that missed the major arteries but still got the bone. The last thing Felicity would want to do was deal with the injury she didn't mean to create, and on a boy who couldn't be a day past his eighteenth birthday.

The guilt was a sour taste in his mouth when her hands knocked clumsily against his, but she silently took the other end of the bandage and shifted the boy's arm from where it lay in her lap. Oliver retrieved the fabric and coiled it tight around the wound, leaving her to do the knotting two-handedly.

While they worked, the boy didn't struggle at all, and only looked at them with milky-blue eyes. His hair was curly and dark bronze and plastered to his forehead from clammy sweat, and his jawline was still blurred with baby fat, even though the rest of his body had the build of an amateur wrestler. He'd been trained, not to the standard of the League, but trained.

"I don't…understand…" he said, in English. His accent was thick and European, unmistakably Russian. "Who…are you?"

"Your name?" Oliver said, in Russian.

His eyes widened as he recognized his language. "Anton," he answered, and switched to Russian. "Why are you helping me?"

"We don't leave children to die," Oliver gently shifted one of Felicity's hands to increase pressure on a certain spot. "But why are you not with the League?"

"I am," Anton said, defensively.

Oliver only looked at him.

Anton stuck out his chin, defiant. "I may not be a full League member — but I have dedicated sacrifices in the League's name. The Cat said that I have only her now — and the League is her."

Sacrifices. It was an ugly word from the lips of a boy who didn't know what it meant.
"What have you done?"

Anton shuddered, turning his head away. His eyes squeezed shut and a clear tear slipped out from the corner, sliding into his hair. Felicity’s head jerked up, worried, but Oliver shook his head at her, waiting for Anton to answer.

"What have you done?" he asked, softer still.

"I killed my family," he said. "Because they would have killed me, knowing what I had become."

Oliver shut his eyes at the image in his mind’s eye — of an adolescent boy standing in the blood of his own family, baptized as a soldier using the oldest and dirtiest trick in the depraved manual of assembling a mindless armed force. Abduct the children from an early age, brainwash them through physical violence or mind-warping training, and if possible — force the children to kill their families, or their friends, relics of their old life. To deprive them of any way out, to give them only one choice. The League.

It was a filthy tactic, and it filled his mouth with an acrid taste.

"Where are the others?" he asked, finally.

Anton looked at him, his mouth slightly open. "I can't —" he said, "I can't — say."

Oliver glanced around in frustration, at the other pinioned boy who wouldn't tell him anything, another unconscious one lying near the crates, to the doors that could open any minute, and played a card he would never have used under normal circumstances.

"What do you know of the Bratva?" Oliver asked. It was a rhetorical question. If the boy was Russian, he would know, one way or the other.

Anton's eyes widened.

"My brothers can take you away. Give you a new life, beyond this. Tell me where the others are and you go with them."

Oliver's conscience rebelled, but the colder, detached part of him knew that he had to work as quickly as possible. Fear was the most powerful motivation — at least to a stranger. Oliver didn't want to remember who'd taught him that. A weapon was a weapon regardless of who had given it to him first.

Instead, he let the shadows behind his eyes rise to the surface, descend on his features, his voice, corrosive as acid but as effective for what he needed to do.

"Or," he said, slowly, "we can find out your full name, your remaining kin, or anyone who wants a part of the boy who massacred his whole family. You choose, Anton. Choose wisely."

His throat convulsing, Anton jerked his head towards the staircase. "The landing," he said. And then — "Please."

Without a word, Oliver left him propped against the crates and got to his feet. It was only until he looked up and met Felicity's questioning stare that he realized — he didn't want to tell her what Anton had said, and what he'd said back.

Because he knew exactly who had taught him that fear was the most powerful motivation.
And because she was living proof that the opposite was true — faith, love, hope — he'd betrayed those ideas, and her, as a means to an end.

So he said, "Let's go," and jerked his head towards the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently the LOA theory isn't that far off (silent fist-pump for everyone who thought of the theory). The pictures do indeed show Oliver shirtless on a snowy mountain (Ho ho ho Christmas is upon us). Also - with Nyssa in what looks like Nanda Parbat. Unfortunately, I seem to have dropped the ball with Nanda Parbat because it looks more modern and less rough-stone-y than I imagined. Whoops. A bit iffy about Ra's al Ghul shirtless though :-/, very glad I decided to keep his robes on when I wrote the fight scenes (wink). And correspondingly, very glad that I conveniently made Oliver lose his shirt during arena fights.
Typical that the staircase would lead down to a secret ladder. Oliver slid out of sight by the rails, leaving her to climb down by the rusty rungs slowly. By the time she'd reached the bottom, he was standing by a very out-of-place generator, old-fashioned, from at least ten years back, judging by the monster-furnace size. It was at the very edge of the pool of faint light cast down by their entrance, and beyond them the vastness stretched. It was far from silent, but Felicity didn't dare step any further, because she could already hear the skittering and scratching of indiscriminate things in the dark.

There was an ominous crank that made her jump, but it was just Oliver turning on the generator, and a row of lights she didn't know existed suddenly flared to life, stretching down the walls like lights on a runway. They revealed squares of metal grating, extending parallel through the floor and to the far wall.

Felicity stood over one of them and looked down, dreading what she'd see.

But it was empty. Just a pool of light from the yellowish lamps, and concrete floor.

There was a muffled shriek, unmistakably human. Oliver was at Felicity's side in a second. She was already bending over the lock, rattling the mechanism experimentally.

"It's old, but I might be able to force it," she said, straightening up. "I need something thin — oh — one of those stabby arrows — the small ones!"

Oliver looked at her in surprise.

Felicity brandished her hands at his slowness. "Now!"

She picked through the handful of flechettes he gave her, finally picking one that had a dart-like tip, thin as a needle. Carefully, she pressed it into the ground, bending it at a slight L-shaped angle.

"How exactly do you know this?" he asked, as she bent over the lock with the modified flechette, her glasses pushed up into her hair while she worked. The levers in the lock clicked as she twisted and maneuvered.

"May have been part of my college foray into civil disobedience," she muttered, and twisted one of the arrows at an impossible angle. "Or not so civil."

The lock clanked, and Felicity grinned into the darkness. "Yes."

Oliver's grip was steady around Felicity's waist as she bent forward into the hole. She used the flashlight function on her tablet and a white light shot straight through the murk.

Felicity gasped.
Eyes, a dozen of them. Paled faces. Sweaty.

And terrified.

Children, but they already knew that. Just not that there’d be that many.

"Oliver, we have to get them out," Felicity said. They'd counted the children in each of the holes. Some were ominously empty, but others had as many as eight. They were divided by gender and then by age. The holes nearest to the door were the youngest, and the ones furthest looked as old as Anton and his friend. Twenty-six in total, not including the few kids they'd left upstairs.

The younger ones cried when they were asked questions about their family, saying they didn't know, repeating the various cities they'd been taken from. The older ones shouted from their cells that the strangers weren't to be trusted. It was like some insane brainwashing timeline, with the youngest being the least likely to fear them, and the oldest looking like they hated the sight of them. Not all of them spoke English, and some of them spoke languages even Oliver didn't know. There were Asian children, white, black…all looking like they'd been there for varying periods of time.

"I know, but they don't have passports, and we didn't exactly come prepared to take a band of children out of Tibet." Oliver had crossed his arms, pacing a tight square of concrete.

Felicity slipped her earpiece into her pocket with a shake of her head and went back to picking at a lock. "Dig's not answering. I've left him a couple of messages, but he's not picking up."

Oliver set the thought aside. They didn't need to contact Dig or Roy just yet. The main thing was to get the children out, but smuggling them through Nanda Parbat and into the passageway inside Nyssa's chambers…given the state of their last interaction, Oliver wasn't willing to bet that she'd be accommodating, despite the normal person's moral obligation to free the children.

But there was a more obvious issue.

"They're not exactly willing to follow us," said Oliver, gesturing at the older kids' cells.

"Because they think you're the enemy," said a clear voice, from one of the holes furthest away. "They've been told that anyone from outside of Nanda Parbat is an enemy, and when you come busting in, dressed like the jackasses who put us in here — forgive us for being suspicious."

Felicity glanced at Oliver, and they both crouched near the hole where the voice had come from. She directed the narrow beam through the cell bars, causing the kid who'd spoken to throw up his hand from the sudden brightness.

"We're not with the League," Felicity said. "We're…undercover."

"Yeah, I guessed as much from the running commentary about contacting your people in the village. About time," he said flatly. He lowered his hand, and she saw that he was an Asian boy around Anton's age, and American, by the sound of his accent. Muscled, well-built, but dirty and sweaty like the others. "Which deadbeat agency finally wised up? CIA? FBI? ARGUS?"

Oliver and Felicity shared a moment of surprise that the kid knew the name. Also, that he could sound so laid-back, given the circumstances — locked in a windowless hole in the ground and all.

"Who are you?" Oliver asked.

"Kang," he said. "Li. San Francisco, 2005. I've been here since I was nine, and you need me,
because I can get the kids to leave with us."

As if on cue, a few other boys emerged from the shadows, clustering around Kang, arms crossed, expressions defiant. Oliver caught Felicity's wrist before she could reach for the lock. "How do we know you're not working for Cheshire?" he said, slow and deliberate.

Kang sighed, as if Oliver was being needlessly stupid. Felicity bit her lip, trying not to show her amusement at the morbid black humor of it all.

"Because, genius," he said, "I know how she gets us into this hellhole. And if we're being all logical and shit, what comes in has to come out. So are you getting us the hell out or not?"

"I think I'm starting to like him," said Felicity. Oliver only shook his head like he knew he was going to regret it, and moved aside so Felicity could get at the lock.

Oliver studied the children, the ones too young to be here, and the ones on the brink of a bloody initiation into adulthood. Just by leaving them alone and watching while they assembled, the leaders were emerging from the miscellaneous group of kidnapped children. The boys all looked towards Kang, and the girls had encircled a surprisingly tiny redhead with choppy short hair and elfin green eyes that had the edges of broken glass.

As little as he enjoyed Kang's attitude, Oliver had to admit that he had an ability to lead. Once he'd climbed out of the cell, he'd helped everyone out as well, comforting the crying ones by jumping into their prisons and lifting them out. Efficient, fearless, gentle — versatile qualities that were essential for survival.

Of all the children, the boys of Kang's age seemed at least willing to admit that the change in situation was a good thing, and the least reluctant to follow were the ones between the territories of childhood and adolescence, the ones that Kang and the redheaded girl had to whisper to before they reluctantly joined the rest.

Felicity murmured to a whimpering little girl in her arms, stick-thin and pale from the underexposure. When she straightened up, Oliver saw the twig-like hands fisted at the back of Felicity's robes, and the startled brown eyes that showed over her shoulder, shadowed by bird-like bones protruding from her face.

"Oliver," she said quietly. "We should go soon."

He nodded, and approached Kang. The circle parted warily and they watched him, a collective of stolen children, snatched by a professional killer to be human weapons. He divided his attention between Kang and the girl, carefully weighing the truth in their eyes.

Oliver crossed his arms and saw Kang tense. "If you turn on us," he said, softly, "there's nothing we can do for you. Even if you escape Nanda Parbat, remember that you will be lost in foreign territory, with no passports and a story so ridiculous that nobody could believe you."

He knew very well that Felicity wouldn't want him to be like this — as merciless as a general, as calculating as the people who'd put them in the cells. They were children who'd been kidnapped, and they did deserve kindness.

Just not until they were out of hell, and he hoped that their leaders understood that.

"The three up there," Kang said, directing his finger towards the ceiling, "they're the only three Cheshire managed to break, and that's because they went insane from the training they put us
through. The rest of us were in dank holes when you found us because we never converted, and she
doesn't trust us to stand guard over the facility. I've been here nine years — and the only thing I held
on to when they tried to break me was imagining the day I'd finally see the sun again." It was Kang's
turn to cross his arms. "That satisfy you?"

Oliver nodded, accepting the truth in his words. But the girl stuck her chin out defiantly. "You're not
from ARGUS, are you?" she said, in a hard voice that reminded him of Thea when she was being
stubborn.

"No," said Oliver. "But I'd like to know how teenagers who've been living in captivity managed to
get a hold of that name."

Their eyes instinctively flickered away, to the gathered children behind them.

"There's a kid," said the girl. "Talks a lot about ARGUS. He knows things. He kept us hoping. Says
his mom knows — knows what they can do."

"Mia." Kang touched her arm, but she slipped it out of his grasp and looked over her shoulder.

"Martin," she said, holding out her hand to a boy, who stumbled out of the shadows like a child to
his mother. As his tiny hand disappeared inside Mia's, he turned his face up to look at Oliver. There
was something very familiar about him — smooth brown skin, the slim, long neck, a slightly flat
nose, the heavy-lidded dark eyes…

Oliver had to restrain himself — separate the boy standing in front of him from the person he
resembled, one who brought on an instinctive shudder of dislike.

"What's his name?" Felicity said, and from the cautiousness in her tone Oliver knew that she could
see it too — that it wasn't just him.

"Martin," said Mia, gently laying her hands on his bony shoulders. The boy had innocent eyes, wide
and relaxed with blind faith, the exact opposite of his mother. "Martin Waller."

Chapter End Notes

Yeahhhh like I said, the story got weird. Notwithstanding previous weirdness that hath
already occurred, because I am an odd fanfic writer. Anyway.

That appearance of She Who Shall Not Be Named though, that kinda throws that
fountain scene in chapter 20-ish into non-canon territory - IF Oliver does find out he has
a kid. Damn (my bad if he does find out). What's Felicity gonna do about that?
"Gentlemen," said Waller. Her calculating stare panned across the room, as though she was committing it all to memory.

Dig sat and chewed his dinner, not tasting a thing. He knew she wouldn't find anything, and even if she did, it was just a computer or two with an encrypted password made foolproof by a certain MIT hacker.

"Hello Amanda," he said, glancing up from his food.

Across from him, Roy played unconcernedly with his cup, nudging it a few inches across the table, then a few inches back. Only Dig could see – because Roy's back was to Amanda – that his hands trembled slightly.

Diggle leaned back in his chair. "What brings you to Tibet?"

Waller still had her eyes on the window as she said flatly, "Don't insult my intelligence, John. We both know I have no patience for the fool. Now tell me what dismal progress your team has made, and maybe we can negotiate some kind of extraction agreement." Waller turned away from the window and pursed her lips. "On a strict quid pro quo basis, of course."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She sighed and pushed off the wall. Her heels clacked on the bare wooden floorboards as she stepped slowly, deliberately, towards the table. Soundlessly, her palms spread out against the scratched wood, as graceful as sculpted clay, each nail perfectly manicured to an intimidating point. Tilting her head, she looked John in the eye, pure black into brown.

"I know that your little vigilante team found Oliver Queen in London, and I know that you were all in Starling at some point, until Mr. Queen presumably escaped and returned to the fold. Of course, we would have let you run amok as we usually do — having estimated a pathetically low chance of you causing any real trouble — but as it so happens we've had some very intricate stipulations as to where a certain collection of trained killers might be nesting, stipulations you backed when you set up camp in this exquisite example of a middle-of-nowhere. Now, Mr. Diggle, would you care to paint a picture of the damage your team has wrought in ARGUS's chances of bringing down the League of Assassins — before I arrest you and your little partner for treason?"

Surprisingly, Roy answered.

"We're just here to do some charity work," said Roy, reaching for the teapot to refill his cup. Which he did, along with a fresh one. It went neatly between Amanda's splayed hands, with only a single drop of tea sliding down the slide. "Set up internet for the kids here, do some good in the area." He shrugged. "It's called being nice — you should try it some time."

Dig felt a smile creep onto his face, met by a steely gaze from Waller. Roy, to his credit, looked back at her. He'd probably gotten used to the same kind of glares from Oliver.

Waller exhaled and pushed off the table. She brushed dust from her palms and clasped them behind her back, strolling back to the window — facing her ghostly reflection in the glass. A few wisps of
white spun past the window, the first snow of the season.

"Loyal, I'll give you that," she said, her back still turned. "But it won't help when I slap you with some highly unsavory child trafficking charges."

Diggle felt like the conversation had taken a complete one-eighty.

"Trafficking?" he repeated. "Amanda, if you wanted to muscle us into working for you with some bogus criminal charges, at least choose something believable."

"Quite believable, John. We have credible intelligence that child-snatching incidents all over the world have trails that lead into Greater Tibet. Boys, girls, the tendency is to take them young. Six years old at least, ten at most. I'd threaten to invent evidence that would implicate you in their disappearances, but I thought I'd appeal to the conscience your little vigilante squad seems to pride yourselves in having. Tell us what you know about the League of Assassins and their location — and you'll help the recovery efforts. Reunite lost children with their parents, broken families made whole again — the classic photo op — you know what to imagine."

"I wish I could help, Amanda, but we don't know anything about missing kids."

"John." The word was a crackle of dangerous rage, threatening to splinter a carefully maintained facade. "Do not disappoint me on this. For Agent Michael's sake, for your daughter's sake — do not disappoint me."

Diggle pushed his chair back, striding around the table to face her. "You know what lying looks like, Amanda — you always have. What's gotten into you? You're acting like it's your own kid —"

Waller spun around, her face contorted with one of her rare manifestations of anger.

"You do not want to suggest that this is personal. Trust me, John, you don't. I've tolerated you because Harbinger is a valuable asset, and you have a certain measure of worth yourself. But you do not want to see what my methods look like when it gets personal."

Diggle crossed his arms, standing his ground. "Seems like I'm about to, Amanda. Which one was it? Coretta? Jessie? Martin?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yeah, I have my sources. I also know you're widowed, and what your three kids mean to you. Now I'm Sara's dad, but I seem to have taken on a few extra children along the way." He indicated Roy, and silently added the two idiots inside the mountain to the list of family. "So I understand what you're feeling right now. But you have to calm down and tell me what's going on."

Waller merely adjusted the cuff of her immaculate navy-blue blazer, and raised one hand to the window in a gesture Diggle didn't recognize until it was too late.

The door caved in with an explosion of splintered wood and warped nails, and armored ARGUS agents streamed in, surrounding Roy and Diggle, the laser sights of a dozen combat rifles trained unwaveringly on their chests. Waller was the vision of a ruthless battle commander, capable of bringing down the axe with a single sweep of her hand, the Mockingbird who sang only for her twisted vision of justice, and loyalty — to the United States of America.

"You constantly forget, John," said Waller, folding her hands behind her back, "that I don't answer to you. Or anyone, for that matter. My country is all that I am bound to uphold, something you seem to have forgotten." She nodded and the team cuffed Diggle's hands behind his back, hauling Roy to
his feet and doing the same.

"You're gonna regret this," Roy spat, struggling against the cuffs ineffectually.

"I doubt it," she said calmly, and turned her back to them as they were marched towards the door and out into the free-falling snow. "For now, you can join the rest of your charity team in detention. I'm sure the rest of your friends won't leave you alone for too long."

Chapter End Notes

Waller scares me. Snow, yay, snow. Also, in hindsight, I would have preferred to make her son's name Gabriel. Sounds so much better than Martin, but those are her children's names in the comics.
Felicity put her foot through the ribcage of a dead animal. Either that, or it was something very crunchy. She bit back the yelp, not wanting to scare the little girl in her arms, but her heart raced with the combined adrenaline of creeping forward in near-darkness and doing it with complete strangers.

"You okay?" Oliver murmured, his hand warm between her shoulder blades. Felicity nodded, and he fell back into step beside her, the faint sound of sloshing reminding her that he was nearby.

"Not sure why it always has to be a sewer," she said, wondering how many diseases she was risking by walking through muck. The end of the street had led into an underground network of sewers, running beneath the city — as if they weren't deep enough already.

"Smart, though," said Oliver. "The League has to channel their waste out somehow."

"Yeah, but Nyssa took me through a ventilation tunnel."

"I can't exactly imagine Nyssa walking through dead animals, can you?" She could tell from his tone that he was smiling.

"Oliver Queen, I believe you just made a joke that actually counts as funny," she said back, smiling in spite of herself. And the smell. "But you get points off for using Nyssa as a reference. True comedians only rely on themselves to generate genuinely terrible jokes."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said softly, and Felicity laughed.

"You know, seeing that the League had bathrooms really ruined it for me. It's like finding out that Santa reads the paper on the toilet, or that the President watches TV. Ruins the aura of mystery. Highly ill-advised that they open it up for a tourist attraction."

Oliver went suddenly quiet, and she realized it was because the group had stopped. He touched Felicity on the elbow and they moved to the front of the group, where Kang and Mia were standing, motionless. The faint light from the lanterns they'd stolen illuminated a dip in the sewer tunnel, where a horizontal ditch cut across their path and funneled the murky water both ways. The tunnel straight ahead sloped up and led to a rusty grate, which Kang was peeling away from the wall, using a sword he'd grabbed from the training rooms underground. Because of him, the older kids all had weapons, which made Oliver feel a mixture of unease and relief. Unease that teenagers were holding real weapons, relief that they could watch their backs, at least.

"We go up," said Kang. "This tunnel catches snow that melts off the peaks." He lifted a hand to show them, the undeniably clear water that dripped freezing into the lantern flame.

"Photographic memory," Mia said, turning to look at Kang with pride. "This one chewed a hole through the sack and saw everything when Cheshire brought him in."

"Good work," Oliver said, and Kang grinned. The further they were from Nanda Parbat, the lighter he'd seemed to get, like he could taste the fresh air.

"Thanks. Now —" He turned to Mia, cupping his hands for her shoe. "Ladies first."

Mia slung her bow over her back and hooked the lantern over her arm. She sprang lightly from
Kang's hand and onto the ledge, and disappeared through the round hole.

"It's not steep, there's just a little slope. Avoid the middle, there's some ice." Her disembodied hand extended out from the gloom, and one by one the older kids got the little ones through.

"You guys are really something," Felicity said, when it came time for her to go through. She had to hold onto the nameless girl in her arms, who'd fallen asleep somewhere through the journey. Kang provided a boost, Mia a helping hand, and Oliver lifting her through by her waist.

Kang seemed to think the latter was superfluous. "Dude," he said, swinging lithely into the hole and stretching a hand back for Oliver. "Relax. I'm not moving in on your girlfriend. I've been in a hole for nine years, but I'm not that desperate."

Because it was a tunnel, sound carried.

Felicity felt hot up to her ears and turned, pretending she hadn't heard. But Mia smirked impishly beside her. Oliver didn't say anything, his face hidden beneath the hood, and the four of them walked in silence until Kang and Mia went on ahead to shepherd the group.

"Just a little more, guys," said Kang, patting Oliver on the arm as he maneuvered around him to the front, which Felicity thought was very brave, given the circumstances.

But Oliver, ever the poster boy for showing his emotions, was his usual inscrutable self.

Felicity, mulling in her usual random mix of thoughts, briefly wondered if they should have set up bugs at the entrance to the sewers. She'd already remotely disabled the computers back in Nyssa's chambers, so that the programs could only start up if she or Oliver worked them again, but the lack of 20/20 vision sat uneasily in the pit of her stomach.

"Oliver," she said, selectively un-seeing the awkwardness. "Don't go back into Nanda Parbat. What if you run into Cheshire? And Nyssa — if she finds out —"

"There were always going to be consequences, Felicity," Oliver said. "I'm prepared to face them if it means you and the children are out of the League's reach."

"I thought we established that we were getting you out too," she prodded, gently.

"There's a greater purpose, remember?" His hand rested briefly on her shoulder. "Ra's al Ghul matters to me. Whatever it takes to stop him. Just like Slade."

Felicity bit her lip, which gave Oliver the chance to transparently change the subject.

"I was thinking that you could send ARGUS a tip. They're equipped to handle extractions, and if you tell them that you, Roy and Diggle have been tracking a child trafficking ring all the way from Starling — they should be willing to get the kids out. Just make yourself scarce when they arrive to pick the kids up."

"But if Martin's her kid," Felicity said, unconsciously searching the children until she found him, "she'll be tracking him."

"I don't know about Amanda's family life. What we have is a suspicion. Worst case scenario, you bring in her son as persuasion — all or nothing. She takes all the kids or none at all, and it'll make her look bad if she doesn't, raise questions about her professionalism that she won't want to answer."

Felicity sighed, as unhappy about it as he probably was. "Sounds like something she would do."
"We all have to do things we aren't proud of," Oliver said, his eye traveling to Anton, lumbering just ahead. He'd been shooting Oliver wary glances the whole way. Felicity observed it curiously, but he didn't elaborate, and a silence descended between them.

The kids started running as the first drifts of snow reached them from the mouth of the tunnel. Kang was the first through, pushing his way out into the fresh piles of brilliant white powder. The rest followed, too excited by the fresh air to realize that the wind was bitterly cold. Felicity's face stung when she climbed through, and turned back to Oliver, but her words were lost over the wind.

It was dark, the sky a midnight blue, soon to become black. They needed to get moving soon. He waved to get Kang's attention, the role of guide reverting back to him. "We're on the north side of Nanda Parbat. The village is on the northeast side, and it's going to take us a few hours to get there. It's going to be cold, and it's not going to be easy, but once you get there, you'll be safe. Is that clear?"

Kang and Mia nodded, and started to herd the children into small groups, assigning each of the older children and themselves somebody to watch. One of the older children, a girl with freckles and a shy smile, came over to take the girl from Felicity.

Oddly bereft without the little girl's warmth, Felicity chafed her arms, exposed from the shortened sleeves. The kids all had tattered blankets and wool wraps they were throwing around themselves, and Felicity imitated them with her shawl, bundling it around her body. Then she followed Oliver's lead and trekked down the side of the mountain, towards their way out.
Oliver was surefooted about where they were going. He didn't stop for anything, but everyone knew that they couldn't afford to. The wind abated slightly, loud enough to prevent their progress from being conspicuous, but less unforgiving against the children's comparative lack of experience with the mountain snow. Whatever training Cheshire had put them through, Felicity could see it in the older kids, who were wearing nothing more than she was but still trudging along without protest.

Eventually, Oliver stopped them at a mountain pass, one that marked the beginning of their descent back to the village. As Kang and the others watched, he maneuvered his way around the shadows, displacing snow as he dug for something.

"Oliver…?" Felicity's teeth chattered as she crouched by him, her hair blowing loose around her face and dusted with snow. "Please don't tell me you're trying to dig a toilet."

"There's a cave behind here. I camped here once. The kids can rest here while we try to contact Dig…and send out the message to ARGUS." Oliver spoke very quietly in her ear, the sound of shifting snow preventing them from being overheard.

Felicity waved to Kang, who jogged over, his face flushed and windburned but still (annoyingly) energetic.

"There's a cave behind here, but we just need to move the snow."

Kang put two fingers in his mouth and whistled, bringing a few guys out to him. Useful — knowing how to whistle. All Felicity could do was pssst, and if she tried to whistle, a phlegm glob.

Oliver, Felicity and the kids shoveled snow clear of the rock until their hands were numb and there was a narrow opening, a dark hole adorned by an archway of pure white.

"We'll rest here for a while," said Oliver. "Everyone get inside."

"You're Oliver Queen," Kang said suddenly. He'd whipped back upright, scattering the armful of bundled twigs and dry grass he'd been using to keep the lantern fires burning — kindling being one of the things Oliver had stockpiled the last time he was there.

Oliver's non-committal response hadn't smothered his alarm bells. Kang chafed a handful of dried twigs, his expression suspicious. "I don't forget faces, and I had a sister in college — who loved you, by the way — so do you wanna tell me how you ended up busting kidnapped children out of jail?"

Oliver said nothing, and blew gently on his handful of tinder. The wisps of smoke glowed into a series of tiny flames, licking across the dried grass. He fed the handful to the lantern, set it on the ground with the others, and started on another one. His shoulder was paining him, demanding attention he wasn't at liberty to give it. Not until he'd seen them back to the village.
"Cool," said Kang, momentarily distracted. He'd apparently never learned how to start a fire — having been kept in an underground cell for a decent share of his formative years. "So what's the deal with you?" Snapping back to the point.

"I went to a few colleges," Oliver said, setting another lantern to the side. "Briefly. What's your point?"

"How does billionaire-playboy-college-dropout become…" Kang gestured at Oliver from top to bottom, from the bow and arrows to the scars and dried blood, "...this?"

"I was shipwrecked on a deserted island, and everyone thought I was dead for five years. I'm not your enemy, and that's about all you need to know." Oliver was brusque, and he regretted it when he saw the sting in the boy's eyes. "Sorry." He looked away, around the mountain cave.

While the kids had been less than enthused about venturing into a shadowy hole again, the cold had taken something out of their qualms, and most of them were huddled at the back of the cave, forming little clusters around the older ones.

"You've done well," Oliver said, admitting it without reluctance. It was quite something for a young man to lead anyone — much less children — out of captivity. To have held on to hope and sanity while withstanding Cheshire's League-trained methods…Kang was a strong boy. And so were the ones who'd left with him.

"It's easy to go crazy," Kang said, his easygoing smile shrinking. "They took us out once a day for training — if Cheshire didn't come, she'd send Cain or someone else. Hand-to-hand, weapons, you name it. Then it was some food, and back to the hole. Lights out for twelve hours, listening to the dark, smelling your own fear, listening to the voice in your head telling you to just give in and do whatever the Cat wants."

He twirled a shriveled flower stalk between his finger and thumb, deep in thought.

"You fought Anton and Min and Xander. They were the first to break. I heard about the Initiations… after. Cheshire keeps her promise. She always brings them to their families." He looked up, the uneven light throwing his features into sharp relief.

"...But she makes sure that they kill someone in front of their family. Then fear takes over, and they kill their family because they can't stand the look in their eyes."

Kang ignited the clump of tinder and dropped it into the lantern, brushing off his hands. They were scarred and Oliver could tell they'd been hurt badly in the past, from hitting something that clearly wasn't meant to be hit and maybe even an old fracture, improperly set.

"These?" Kang said, shaking back his sleeves to show more irregular scrapes and half-healed injuries, marring the smooth line of youthful muscle. "Punishment for keeping morale up. Cheshire didn't like my singing so much."

"Why'd you do it?" Oliver asked, out of genuine curiosity.

"It was worth it. She kept trying to make us forget who we were – become something we didn't want to be. I wanted her to know that we were human beings, and I wouldn't forget myself, or anyone else."

Kang tugged his sleeves back down.

"You have a good memory," Oliver said, when Kang fell silent.

"Good use for it, eh?" He grinned, and picked up a few lanterns, swinging them jauntily from his wrists. "Thanks for breaking us out, man. I like you better when you're not The Rich Douche my sister used to run a Myspace fan page about."

Oliver cracked a smile at Kang's honesty. "You're in for a few surprises when you get back to San Francisco. Now get some sleep."

"Peace," Kang said, and loped over to distribute the lanterns.

Oliver did the same, setting them down in sections of bare ground if the older children were asleep. Mia, sitting up against the wall, opened one clear green eye as he put one beside her. She nodded in thanks and went back to sleep, huddled around the little girl Felicity had been carrying on their way out of Nanda Parbat.

Felicity.

Oliver turned instinctively to look for her amongst the flickering firelight and relaxed, sleeping faces. But she wasn't there. He felt a brief, irrational surge of panic — until he turned towards the cave mouth and saw her sitting against the wall with Martin Waller.

Felicity had never liked Amanda Waller — also known as Crazy Drone Lady — since she'd tried to drone-strike her home into a scorch mark. But she was surprised by Martin. Pleasantly surprised. She was expecting the kid from *The Omen* or the devil's spawn from *Rosemary's Baby* (she was big on old movies), but Martin Waller was...a kid. He'd come up to her after another abortive attempt to contact Diggle and successfully sending out the tip to ARGUS — re-routed and disguised to look like it was coming from Starling, of course.

"Is that the new model?" he asked, rubbing his eyes as though he'd specifically gotten up to ask her that, lured from all the way across the room by the bright screen. Narrow and compactly built, he had a head of curly brown hair and looked like he should have been wearing glasses.

Felicity closed her mouth, fighting off the Amanda Waller comparisons. It wasn't fair to judge a kid by their parents — her and Oliver's included. "Yup," she said, scooting over so that he could sit down. "Couldn't sleep?"

Martin shook his head and squeezed close to her, propping his chin comfortably on her forearm so he could look at the screen (which she'd cleared as soon as he'd come over).

"I haven't seen a computer for six months," he said. His voice was clear as a bird's, but matter-of-fact enough to avoid the gooey *aw* factor. "Missed keeping up with my TV shows."

Felicity found it hard to tell if he was kidding. Martin Waller didn't seem like a kid who laughed, but one who observed — a little like Oliver, actually. He sniffed and watched as she flicked around, trying to find something remotely age-appropriate out of the sniper programs and hacking protocols. Finally she settled on her attempt at a trivia game, an upcoming birthday present for Barry. Felicity had worked on it so long ago that she barely remembered the answers.

"What are the three most commonly spoken languages?"
Martin blinked. "Mandarin, English…and Spanish, I guess."

She tapped out the answer. "Oo," she said, when it turned out to be right.

Martin got the next few questions too, which made her seriously rethink their difficulty level. She glanced over his curly head, at Oliver and Kang, who were bent over the lanterns. Their voices were murmurs, impossible to distinguish over the wind.

"How old are you again?" she asked, after he got another one (about Biology!) right.

"Eight," he said, prodding the screen for the next question. "Don't worry, I just read a lot of Internet encyclopedias."

"Were you taken like the others?" Felicity asked, out of genuine curiosity. It seemed like a huge coincidence that Cheshire had been so careless, to snatch the son of one of the most dangerous people in the world. And he didn't seem like the type to follow strangers, either.

"I was waiting for my sister Jessie outside a store. She came up behind me and said she was going to take one of us. She asked whether I wanted it to be me — or Jessie. She said I was a smart kid, and I had five seconds to decide before she pricked me with her claws. I said I'd go, and she scratched me at the back of my neck. I went all sleepy, and when I woke up, I was in the ground."

Felicity's arms tightened instinctively around Martin, but he didn't seem to notice. Not even when she traced the faint scar at the back of his neck, left by a poisoned claw.

"You're very brave," she said, meaning it. "I would have gone nuts without my computers."

"I knew ARGUS was coming." Martin wiggled around, looking up at her with his head against her side. "When my mom and dad fought, my dad used to shout that mom was too busy saving other people's children instead of her own. I guess the idea about ARGUS kinda stuck."

His eyes were hooded with sleep, each blink getting slower.

"So your mom doesn't tell you what she does?" Felicity asked, tucking the loose folds of her shawl under his chin.

"She's not around a lot." His mouth twisted instinctively in a frown. "But I figured since she loves her job so much — she'd be good at finding me…if I went missing…"

Martin took two more breaths and the small frown relaxed, lapsing into expressionless sleep.

Felicity blinked hard to clear her fuzzed-up vision, but turning towards the windy cave mouth didn't exactly help. It was probably not a good thing that discussing absent/dead parents usually sent her to some uncomfortable blubbering place.

Still, there was a tinge of newfound respect for Amanda Waller in her mind. Not for the crazy drone inclinations, or the absentee parenthood, but for — intentionally or not — isolating ARGUS's influence from her children.

At least, for the moment. Until ARGUS came to get the children out of Nanda Parbat.

Chapter End Notes
I quite like Kang. Just had to say that.
Oliver peeled the glove from his left hand. It came away like a layer of skin, flakes of rust that showered the snow in front of him. Keeping his left shoulder still, he undid the front of his armor and pushed it down, feeling for the arrow wound with a practical, unemotional touch. Broken scabs, but no fresh bleeding.

He was sitting at the cave mouth, partly to keep watch, partly so that he could clean his wounds with the snow piled around the threshold. Felicity had fallen asleep against the cave wall, Waller's son right beside her. Her glasses were slightly askew, her head tilted back, hair clouding around her face. She would probably wake up if she knew what he was doing, but he didn't want her hands covered in his blood again.

Gritting his teeth, Oliver slapped a fistful of snow into his wound. The cold soothed the aching muscles in his shoulder, starting to bring down some of the swelling. He bent forward and let his eyes close. Alone and unwatched, it was easy to admit that he was exhausted. Abused, in pain, and tired of fighting.

But being tired was different from being done. That was something he'd learned a long time ago. And he knew the best thing to do was keep himself busy, unthinking. Melting snow in his hand, he cleaned the blood from his arm, scrubbing with his nails until the blood came away. The snow in front of him was tinged pink by the time he was finished, and his skin was covered in goosebumps, but he felt clean. Awake.

The sky was still dark, maybe a shade lighter than it had been an hour ago, but Oliver knew there was still time. He looked over his shoulder, back at Felicity. It occurred to him that he hadn't ever seen her sleep — to the point where the sight was almost unimaginable to him. To be fair, he was usually the reason she was deprived of sleep, having to be in the Foundry during the odd hours of the night. Her eyes were always bright and acute and honest, following him the way his eyes followed her, seeing through his lies.

There was a lot he still hadn't said to Felicity. Gratitude, apologies…and goodbyes. The selfish part of him wanted very badly to wake her. He didn't want to leave it like that — between them. Sending her back to the village in a rush and disappearing back into the mountain like a ghost…the uncertainty and the threat of war hovering above the prospect of returning to Starling. Blotting out the sun.

Oliver exhaled, the breath clouding in the chilly air. He felt the cold on his face and the vastness of the night sky, and for a moment he wished that he wasn't alone, that there was a warm hand in his, and that for once in his life, he wanted to fall asleep with Felicity beside him and wake up to her in the morning.

They were beautiful dreams, and Oliver rarely had them. His dreams were ragged creatures with cruel claws and deadly fangs, and in his sleep he fought them to stay alive, until he woke in the morning with the taste of blood and metal in his mouth, reaching for someone who wasn't there.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. An abundance of maybes.

Maybe — one day it would be different.
Felicity didn't remember falling asleep. She woke with a little start, knocking her head against the stone wall.

"Nice," she said groggily.

Gradually, her eyes adjusted to the dying glow of the lanterns at the back of the cave, the faint bluish tinge to the light coming from the cave mouth.

A lone figure sat there, keeping watch. Felicity scrubbed a hand across her face and bundled herself in the shawl, careful not to wake Martin as she crept to the front of the cave.

"Hey," she said, maneuvering her stiff legs into something resembling a normal sitting pose. "Did you sleep?"

Oliver shook his head, his face shadowed under the hood.

"Cheerful." Felicity flicked snow in his direction, but it only glanced off his leg. "How's the shoulder?"

"Fine."

"You're a terrible liar."

"Better."

"Good."

Felicity picked at the fraying hem of her trousers, her knees drawn up to her chest and the shawl blanketed around her shoulders. She breathed warm air into her knees, watching the snow drift lazily as the wind took it. The clouds curled around the mountain peaks, ghostly beautiful but high and cold and lonely.

"You should have woken me up," she muttered. "I could have been sitting here with you."

"Because I'm not used to being alone," he answered, with the faintest suggestion of a smile.

Felicity brushed her hair behind her ear, turning to look at Oliver. "Because I don't want you to be."

Oliver didn't say anything. Then, with a low sigh, as if he'd lost a battle with himself, he slowly pulled down his hood and turned to look at her.

Felicity shivered, but it wasn't from the cold. She felt the intentness of his stare, the way he traced her features, from the flyaway crown of her head, the bridge of her nose — reddened from the cold — and the silvered breath leaving her lips. He looked at her like it was the last time, and she didn't want it to be.

"Hey," she said, the folds of her shawl dropping around her — around them — as she knelt in front of him. "Stop it."

Oliver's eyes were wide and dark, exactly level with hers as his hands came up to clasp her face. She remembered this, from a year ago in the hospital corridor. The sudden touch of his hands on her face and then — the feeling of being kissed. That Oliver was kissing her and the instant she'd thought that everything was going to be okay. His hands, so large and warm and gentle, against her jaw, cupping
the pulse in her neck.

His touch on her face brought it all back. The memories and the emotions and the promises. She had never been scared of Oliver, but all of a sudden she was, and she didn't want to be scared again.

"Stop," she whispered, "dangling maybes."

Oliver's breath fanned warm across her cheeks, and she closed her eyes — because she didn't trust herself to choose. She wanted to kiss Oliver again, but she wanted it to be at the right time and for the right reason. Because they'd decided to be together and face whatever consequences came after, because he could be both Oliver Queen and The Arrow. Because it wasn't a plaintive goodbye, but a beautiful beginning.

She wanted nothing and everything, and she closed her eyes because she didn't trust herself to choose. Because she couldn't bear to.

Maybe her thoughts showed on her face, because the kiss never came. Oliver's clothes shifted, as if he was moving, as if he was kneeling too. She felt the gentle pressure of his hands guiding her face, somehow moving it closer, if it was even possible.

And he kissed her softly on the forehead.

She opened her eyes and blinked at him in surprise. He was smiling like it was a goodbye, and in a way, she supposed that it was. His hand on the back of her neck, he pulled her close so their foreheads touched and they were looking down at the void between them, the snow beneath their knees.

"Now I don't owe you a goodbye," he said, softly.

Felicity's mouth twitched. "Just a homecoming."

Oliver's forehead brushed hers as he nodded. "I'll come back."

"Promise me," she said, even though in her heart of hearts she knew that she didn't need to say it, because Oliver would do his best to fight for himself, for her, and that was enough. As long as he was fighting, it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Since I can't really write the forehead kiss into the narrative before Oliver joined the LoA, decided to throw it in here. Cheers.
"We could run, you know," Felicity said, jokingly.

Oliver glanced at her with a little smile. "Already paid my deposit on the room in Nanda Parbat."

She sucked in a painfully cold breath of mountain air, praying she wouldn't get a nosebleed. "That was actually kinda funny. You know, if it wasn't also kinda tragic."

Oliver's hand was warm between her shoulder blades as they waited for the others to catch up. They both stood at the crest of the slope, the start of the downhill hike towards the village, tiny as a diorama in the distance. She saw the first pinprick of lights in the windows, in the pale blue glow of twilight.

Felicity silently replayed the ARGUS acknowledgement in her head, along with the worries about Roy and Diggle being unresponsive to communications. She'd checked via GPS and the van was still parked in the village, but the computers were down. Maybe they'd had to leave the house for some reason — or they'd had to hide the tech.

Either way, it quickened her pace. She needed to see them — to make sure.

Felicity had to avert her eyes from the rising glare of the sun, at the impending brightness of the snow covering the ground all around them. They'd slowed down at the slope to help some of the children down — the ones who were practically falling down the hill on their unsteady legs. Martin reached for Felicity's hand with the unquestioning trust she expected least from anyone associated with Amanda Waller. They made their way down the slope together, Martin asking questions about density and the weather patterns of Tibet the whole time, and she met Oliver's wordless glance over Martin's head.

"He's sweet," she whispered, after Martin moved out of earshot. "Nothing like her."

Oliver still didn't look very convinced, and Felicity rolled her eyes. The weapons Kang and the rest had stolen from their underground training rooms were glinting in the light of the rising sun, something Felicity was starting to worry about, that they were making themselves too conspicuous.

"Oliver —" she began, after Kang's sword shot a blinding death-glare in her direction. "Should they try to cover…?"

She trailed off, because something had caught her eye. Over the top of the slope, she could still see the mountain, unevenly heaped with snow. But under the sun, there was a new metallic glint, the same kind of glint the children's weapons were giving off. Like someone hadn't bothered to camouflage them either.

Oliver tensed suddenly beside her. He drew his bow and shot an arrow into the distance — so quick that it registered as a single action.

Then his mouth was at her ear and he was shoving her away and she heard only one word: "Run."

Of course she wouldn't run. Oliver couldn't afford to be annoyed, but he was. He'd forced them all to
retreat off the crest, hating to relinquish the advantage of higher ground to their pursuers, but he had no choice. All the distractions, reduced to a single goal — to make sure everyone reached the bottom of the hill. As soon as they hit the grass, they'd be within sprinting distance of the village.

Until then, he'd guard them. There were at least four pursuers — League-trained, all of them presumably ordered to kill. Whether they were scouts send out in pursuit of him, or guards who'd noticed the disturbance, it wasn't likely they'd stop to talk. They'd recognize Oliver, and it would get back to Ra's al Ghul.

As repugnant as the thought of taking lives in front of children, Oliver didn't have a choice. And he fired to kill.

Oliver's arrow hit one in the shoulder, knocking him flat onto the ground. "Get away," he said to Kang, loading another.

The boy had a sword in either hand, and was clearly not intending anything other than to fight.

"Don't know how useful that bow's gonna be when they reach us," Kang said, flashing a grin that was somehow both cocky and earnest.

Oliver shot another arrow — deflected off a sword. It was very hard not to wish for exploding arrows, not when the assassins kept getting up.

"Are you prepared to kill?" he asked harshly, in the moment of silence.

Kang glanced at the retreating children, then back at Oliver. Under the easygoing exterior, Oliver saw the flash of steel.

"For them," Kang said, and nodded.

After a beat, Oliver nodded too. "Move," he said, shoving Kang ahead of him. The assassins were closing in.

It was chaos. Children were stumbling over the uneven ground, needing to be carried or guided. Felicity was a blur of gold in his peripheral vision, scooping up a fallen kid and running towards the bottom of the hill. Her eyes darted up towards him, a flash of pale blue.

"Behind you!" she yelled.

Oliver turned and caught the edge of a sword on his bow. He could hear the enraged breathing in his attacker, see it in the frenzied black eyes showing above the hood and cowl. Metal screamed as Oliver dragged his bow out from under the blade — muscles in his shoulder tearing in protest — and swung. The sword spun through the air, an arc of silver under the dawn light. Oliver kneed him in the chest and shot an arrow straight through the heart.

Fresh blood crystallized in the frozen air as Oliver took off. Dead men told no tales.

"Go!" Felicity rushed the children into the grassy field, sending them sprinting into the village. "Find somewhere to hide and don't come out for anyone else but us."

She said it over and over again, until the words were starting to lose meaning. Different children in her arms, their sweaty hands leaving hers as she sent them in a desperate dash towards uncertain safety.
Oliver was fighting a League member holding a gigantic axe that made her heart beat uncomfortably fast into her throat, and Kang was — shockingly — holding his own against another. Their swords were moving so fast that she had to avert her eyes to avoid flash-blindness. Behind her, Mia was guarding the children that were still running, firing arrows into the pursuing assassins. Three at least, who were firing back, careless of the children still making it across the grassland. Mia's hair was as conspicuous as a traffic cone under the rising sun as she popped up and down from behind the rock and fired. The other teenagers with weapons were crouching behind the scattered boulders, taking cover as the arrows sparked off the stones. One of them was throwing knives that kept glancing off the assassin's swords.

"Must admit, I wasn't expecting that," Mia said, crouching behind a rock as arrows skittered into the dried grass around them. For someone so tiny, she held a horn bow that was almost as tall as she was — with the kind of ease that would make Roy feel very competitive. Mia shoved her ragged fringe out of her eyes and fired another arrow around the rock, ducking as a returning one broke across the stone.

Felicity was running out of ideas. She'd lost her knife in the house, back in Nanda Parbat. That left either grass, or…

The snow flashed blindingly around them.

She groped in the ground, gathering handfuls of snow and packing it into a hard sphere. It'd been an embarrassingly long time since she'd had a snowball fight, much less one with pointy things flying all over the place.

"I'm going to regret this," she said, clutching it in front of her chest as she debated whether or not to go through with it.

Too late. Mia made a sound of protest as Felicity jumped up from behind the rock and let it fly.

Felicity still wasn't sure what she'd been aiming for. She just saw something wearing black and threw it like fourth-period gym, softball edition.

And missed. Completely. Felicity would have died of embarrassment right then and there, but it soared past one of the assassins, distracting him enough for Mia to fire. Her arrow caught him in the arm and two more got his legs in quick succession. A snowball crashed into his face, knocking him flat onto the ground. Felicity spun around in surprise. One of the kids — the one who'd been throwing knives — grinned at her, and hefted another enormous snowball between his hands.

"Kang!" Mia suddenly leaped up and over the boulder.

"Don't!" Felicity tried to catch her, but Mia was too quick. Cursing, she took off after her.

Just ahead, Kang was bleeding from a wound in his side, on his back and reaching for the fallen swords as the assassin raised his for the deathblow. Mia's arrow glanced off the blade with a screech and Kang rolled, grabbing the swords and coming up fighting.

But they didn't see the shadow looming on the hill above them. Felicity did, just as ten bladed shadows of steel claws cut across the snow.
Bwahahahaha.
Felicity didn't really know what she was planning to do (the lack of a plan was really becoming a recurring theme with her) once she'd gotten face-to-face with Cheshire. But she was, standing between Kang and Mia, who'd just taken down an assassin together.

"Don't even," Felicity said to them both. She wasn't going to lose them because they had a (highly understandable) bone to pick with one of the League's deadliest and most sadistic assassins.

Thank God they listened.

They both watched Cheshire warily, but not as warily as Felicity, who'd seen exactly what she could do. Compared to her, the other assassins who'd come after them were small potatoes. At least Kang and Mia knew that it would be better to run — regardless of what she'd done to them in that underground prison.

"You," said Cheshire, a low growl that sent a shiver to the base of Felicity's skull. "You annoying little rat. Meddling in matters you cannot begin to understand."

"Um," Felicity said, even though alarm bells were telling her to shut up, "Technically speaking, we exposed a security flaw in your little child-abduction ring. So maybe a thank you —"

Cheshire cracked her knuckles, making the foot-long metal claws attached to her fingers ripple in a highly disturbing manner.

Felicity silently searched for Oliver — but he was somehow fighting two assassins, and their fight was basically three near-identical blurs of black leather and steel.

"I'll deal with the traitor later," said Cheshire, as if she could tell what Felicity was thinking. "Once I can show him your severed head. Punishment for betraying my mistress."

Felicity swallowed and said, "Graphic."

Something blunt dug into her spine, a silent nudge from the two people behind her. It felt like a knife hilt, but she had no way of knowing until she took it. Plan B.

Cheshire took a step forward, her shoes sinking slightly into the snow. "Now, Sa'idan, are you ready for death?"

"Actually," She counted to three in her head, digging the tip of her shoe into the snow, as deep as she could manage. "It's Felicity Smoak."

Cheshire tilted her head in momentary confusion, and Felicity moved.

"Go!" She kicked up a wall of snow between them and Cheshire — and they all broke into a run. There was a cut in her palm from snatching the knife from Kang, but it was worth it to have a weapon in her hand when facing off against a taller and more lethal version of Isabel Rochev.

Felicity felt the blades tear at the back of her robe. She spun around on instinct, and the knife crashed against five screeching claws, except she'd forgotten about the other hand. Felicity let go of the knife and swerved as the claws swiped past her throat, deadly as razor blades. Cheshire swung another blow and Felicity deflected her arm like she’d been taught (which was as much a surprise to her as it was to Cheshire). Then, with one arm grasping Cheshire's, Felicity did what came from instinct, from
training with Diggle and her penchant for inflicting blunt-force trauma. She made a fist and punched Cheshire in the face.

It was *definitely* not League-level, but Cheshire's initial stroke had been surprisingly sloppy, as if she hadn't expected Felicity to be any kind of threat. To a certain extent, that was true. She really wasn't — physically, and especially when she was trying to be. It was the accidental flailing and sudden rush of instinct kicking in that usually got people.

Cheshire turned her head and spat into the snow. Her teeth were bloody when she smiled, and it was as unnerving as seeing a shark grin. Felicity's hand hurt like she'd punched a cinderblock, but she pulled it together and turned to face Cheshire again.

A little too late. Felicity had just enough time to twist before the claws tore into flesh, a blow that should have cut into her torso but curved instead across her ribs and into her back. She gasped as blood — *her* blood — flew from the blade and steamed into the wintry air. With a noise of contempt, Cheshire hurled Felicity into the snow, and stalked towards her. Felicity landed on her front, and had barely coughed out the snow in her mouth when Cheshire's kick crashed into her ribs, making her vision pulse red and searing red-hot lines of pain into her torn skin.

Breathing through her teeth, Felicity called on every inch of mental resistance she possessed, to force her stubborn body to move — too slowly.

With her back turned, she could see the shadow in the snow, etched by the sun, as unreal as a shadow puppeteer's creation. The claws were spread for the finishing blow, and Felicity sucked in her breath.

An arrow whizzed over her head and struck bone, sprinkling Felicity's hair and the back of her neck with shockingly warm blood. Three more, and the surprisingly final sound of a body hitting the snow.

Felicity couldn't lift her head, not even to see who it was, to see what had happened. The pain was spreading across her back, radiating in agonizing shivers that were both hot and cold at the same time. *Poison*, she reasoned. But it definitely didn't feel like poison oak. She could hear Mia and Kang beside her, their uncertainty, their fear.

A shadow fell over her — which could have been her mind playing tricks, but when a familiar pair of hands cupped her face, Felicity had no reason to doubt. As the pain faded into a muted reddish light and retreated behind a thick white haze, and Felicity knew she was out.

Oliver remembered the last time he'd carried Felicity, after the explosion at the restaurant. He'd known that she wasn't dead. And the time before that — after the crash — he'd known that she wasn't dead either. Now he wasn't so sure.

The only thing he could think of was the blood. Not the pain in his shoulder from carrying her weight, but the way her face was flecked with her own blood, and the spreading stains in her clothes. As soon as he'd picked her up, he registered the slashes on her back and the glimpses of bare skin under her torn clothes that were livid from forming bruises — possibly from broken ribs. Felicity's head knocked against his collarbone, and her breathing was shallower than usual, evident in the lack of clouding when her breath met the cold air. He tried not to jolt her as he moved, but the trade-off in favor of stability meant that she lost valuable time. Calculations, deductions — all to hide the fact that his anger was rising.

*What were you thinking?* Oliver was furious — at her recklessness, and at the fact that he'd only put
four arrows in Cheshire. She deserved more, for extending a fight with him to someone as innocent as Felicity.

"Is she going to be okay?" Mia asked, jogging to keep up with him.

"I don't know," Oliver said, mastering his urge to lash out. "But I need you to keep the children all in one place."

She nodded and broke into a sprint, reaching the group of children ahead of him. Oliver covered the last few feet of grassland and entered the deserted village, only one thought on his mind. He had to get her inside, to Dig, who knew more about battlefield wounds and how to treat them. Then he had to retrieve Cheshire's claws and try to find out what poison she'd coated them with this time, hide the bodies of their pursuers, cover his tracks. Laying out methodical steps to smother the instinctive panic of having a loved one threatened. To smother the fear that threatened to overpower all logical thinking and bring about precisely what he feared most — the death he'd seen in the pit, the death he'd thought was conquered, proved wrong by having Felicity stand alive beside him in the Pit.

Oliver found the house and had just reached the bottom stair when the door swung open. Instead of Dig and Roy, armed soldiers filed out of the house, all pointing their assault rifles at him from the staircase, from the doorway. Behind him, a dozen more soldiers streamed out of the alleyways and trained their guns on his back.

Oliver's temper was momentarily masked by his surprise — as the soldiers behind him moved aside to admit a tall black woman with striking features and a gaze that melded calculation with cruelty.

"Hello, Mr. Queen," said Amanda Waller. She took one look at the blood on his armor, at Felicity's limp body in his arms, and a small smile curved her lips. "I see that I won't have to persuade you to go quietly. I must say that it makes things so much easier."
"You look tired, Mr. Queen." Waller flicked through a file, seemingly oblivious to the glare Oliver shot her. "It can't have been easy, running with the League of Assassins for a year."

Lying between them on a steel table, Felicity stirred but didn't wake as the medics examined the cuts on her back, five long tears from where Cheshire's claws had raked the skin, ribs to her lower spine. One of them took a swab from the torn tissue, while the other pushed a syringe into the area and took a blood sample.

She made an involuntary sound as the needle went in, her fingers brushing against Oliver's as they tensed. After a glance at Waller, who was still reading the files, Oliver took Felicity's hand in his, subconsciously passing his fingers over the pulse in her wrist, as if he wanted to make sure she was still alive. It was usually him on the receiving end of medical assistance, so he had limited experience with being the one standing by. But he hadn't expected to feel so superfluous, a complete bystander to the battle raging inside her mind and body.

In the comparative warmth of the room, the smell of blood had seemingly amplified. Oliver felt it dry on his armor, blood that belonged simultaneously to him, the nameless assassins he'd killed…and Felicity. His grip on her hand tightened.

"I'm sure Miss Smoak will survive her injuries," said Waller, who had finally looked up. "If you cooperate."

Oliver felt his pulse spike from irrational anger — irrational because he knew Waller's methods and he shouldn't have been surprised that she had an agenda in return for basic human decency.

"What do you want?" Oliver asked flatly, neither denying nor validating what she already knew.

Waller nonchalantly flipped the file onto the steel table, seemingly unconcerned that there was already a person on it.

"Don't worry, Mr. Queen, I'm only interested in retrieving the abducted children. I'm aware that one of them happens to be my son, and naturally, I would like to see him back home."

Oliver narrowed his eyes.

"Your son," he repeated, letting the disbelief hang between them. Not that she had a son, but the fact that she was more invested in the child abductions than the manhunt for Nyssa al Ghul.

"Yes," she echoed. "My son. He told me about a certain Felicity Smoak and how much he hopes her recovery will be swift. As you can probably guess, my son is not easily charmed. She must be quite a remarkable young woman."
Oliver didn't trust himself to answer. Waller could see that his hand was still holding onto Felicity's, and like a cat with a mouse, she was batting the observation around, seeing if she could draw blood.

Waller smiled at his silence, her fingers tapping on the table with mechanical precision. "I see. Regardless, this is a reprieve, Mr. Queen. Not at my hands, but in deference of my son's wishes."

Oliver felt his jaw clench. "I wouldn't expect anything else," he said, with cutting sarcasm.

"Mr. Queen," Waller said, her voice a terse whip-crack. There was no smile now. "Of course I am aware of the League, and the threat they pose. However, I also know that a stealth convoy like the one we currently possess is incapable of taking on the full force of the League, even if you were so kind as to provide me with the location of — what was it — Nanda Parbat. I know the difference between strategy and foolhardiness — a distinction you do not need to draw for me. I know what it means to be a mother, but I know what it means to be a general. The League will face justice, and a reckoning is coming, make no mistake. But the mission comes first."

Oliver said nothing. The mission, he knew, could mean many different things with Amanda Waller, who was a master at pursuing multiple secret agendas. Many of which had dangerous implications for anyone unaware of her schemes.

"You're not going to let me back into Nanda Parbat, are you?" he said, as if he would have left, with Felicity lying unconscious on the table in front of him.

Waller nodded at the guards, who took Oliver by the arms, waiting for the order of dismissal.

"No," said Waller, lightly. "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Queen."

She flicked her hand, and the soldiers escorted Oliver from the room. Felicity's hand slipped out of his and lay on the table, empty and open.

The guard pushed Oliver roughly into the room and slammed the door behind him. The rudimentary bolt slid back into place, along with the live hum of a new security addition, something of the electroshock variety, automatically activated if he tried touching the door again.

"Ah," said Diggle, sitting against the wall with his hands cuffed behind him. He wore a resigned expression. "I was hoping Waller wouldn't get you."

"Where's Felicity?" Roy asked, sitting cross-legged with his similarly cuffed hands in his lap. His knuckles were bruised, as if he'd tried punching his way around before giving up.

They both fell silent at Oliver's expression. He let his back rest against the wall and slid slowly to the ground, the cuffs digging into his back. His hair and clothes were still dripping from when ARGUS had hosed him down, until he'd been standing in a pool of reddish water. At least he didn't smell as strongly of blood, which would have been overpowering in the windowless room lit only by a flickering gas bulb.

"She's being treated. We had a run-in with the League on the way out, and —" Oliver was just realizing how much worse it felt to say out loud. "— she got hurt."

"Bad?" Diggle asked, immediately.

Oliver shook his head. He'd stayed long enough to see the bleeding stop. "They're treating her. It shouldn't be."
"You okay?" Roy asked, looking warily at Oliver.

"I'm fine," Oliver said, but he felt like there was a weight pressing down on his skull, and had to close his eyes for a moment. The dull aches and throbs from the injuries all over his body were starting to return as well, as the adrenaline ran its course and the numbness brought about by action began to fade.

"Felicity's strong, Oliver — she'll pull through," said Diggle, nodding like he meant it.

Oliver appreciated Diggle's kindness — instead of the blame he should have been dishing out. It was by all accounts Oliver's fault, because the underlying condition of Felicity going into Nanda Parbat was that he would protect her.

And he hadn't.

Which made him feel like hell.

"It was Cheshire," Oliver said. "One of the League assassins. She works for Nyssa."

Oliver wanted to tell them everything, about the abducted children, about Ra's al Ghul, but he had no doubts whatsoever that the room was bugged and ARGUS was listening on the other end. So he closed his eyes and let the back of his head rest against the concrete.

"Did you…?" Roy asked, suddenly.

Oliver nodded, without opening his eyes. He could visualize the arrows striking Cheshire in crisp, unflinching detail, unmarred by the battle-rage. The first in her arm, paralyzing the nerve that would have made it possible for her to complete the downward swing. The second arrow struck her in the chest, aimed to puncture her left ventricle, but he would have settled for severing the aorta. She was already bleeding to death by the time the third hit her, hard enough to make her lose her balance, and the fourth only punctured her left lung because she was falling as he shot.

Most people lost their expressions as they died, as though their bodies became soulless vessels in death. But Cheshire's face had been twisted with cruel laughter, even as she bled out in the snow. Her final words had been too garbled to hear, and Oliver didn't care for them.

But he did remember the rage — the rage he'd refused to unleash at Ra's al Ghul's command. As he revisited the events in his mind, as though his memory had made them physical paths he could tread, Oliver understood how rage made some fighters powerful.

When he fought with precision and strategy, it was because the world around him was burning. But when the rage was his, it felt like he had set the fires himself. It shunted aside all reservations, all second-guessing, and demanded an answer in blood. It was a terrible kind of power, hedonistic and twisted and selfish, but when Felicity's life hung in the balance, Oliver realized — even if she would never ask him to — he would have burned the world down for her.

"So what now?" Diggle asked, from his corner in the room.

Oliver opened his eyes. Waller was going to try and take him back to Starling City. But he had a plan to carry out, and he could only do that while he was still in the League, part of Ra's al Ghul's inner circle. Whatever Waller's plans were, Oliver would stand with Nyssa. Even with her plans to declare war and for all the darkness in her soul, she had some notion of honor, some notion of sacrifice. It was an insurmountable risk she took, plotting against the Demon in his own castle. And unlike Waller, Nyssa knew what it meant to risk everything she had for something she believed in, to lead the charge instead of sending nameless soldiers and giving orders from a darkened room.
She also understood as well as Oliver, that the world would be better off without Ra's al Ghul.

"We wait," Oliver said, mindful of the unseen listeners.

To see what Waller was really planning.
Felicity woke in a lot of pain. Not Cramp Day pain. But Thumbscrews-Hammer-Bashing pain, the kind unresolvable by some hot tea and a nice blanket with pandas on it. She had a habit of forgetting when she’d fallen asleep, so for a moment, she wondered why she was lying on her face. Why her sides felt like they’d doubled as pincushions. And why there was a sour taste in her mouth, like she’d thrown up in her sleep.

Then the memories all came snapping back, hard enough to give her whiplash.

Kang and Mia.

Cheshire.

Cheshire’s claws.

Oliver.

Ow.

Felicity could see part of her reflection in the steel table. Her breath condensed against the metal, but between breaths she could see the bruising on her jaw, the shadows under her eyes…not even counting the parts she couldn’t see but could most certainly feel.

There was a sheet on her back for modesty’s sake, but other than that, they’d taken the clothes she’d been wearing in the League — what was left of them, anyway, if she remembered where Cheshire’s claws had gotten her. Felicity shut her eyes, because she knew she was going to regret moving when every inch of her body was telling her to stay horizontal. But she braced her hands against the table and heaved.

It hurt. Oh God, it hurt.

Felicity’s fingernails scraped silently against the slick metal as she struggled to support her weight, as her elbows jerked under the strain. Her breathing was tense and shallow and hurt her sides, but she thought of all the times Oliver had been lying on a table just like the one she was on, back in the Foundry. He’d always come back, whether it was broken ribs, gunshot wound, or near-death from poison…Disregarding the fact that he had about a hundred and fifty pounds of muscle on her, if an ex-billionaire-college-dropout could do it, Felicity was going to try.

After grunting and shaking for what felt like an hour, Felicity managed to push her torso off the table, enough to count as sitting up. Success. However hollow that definition was, anyway. She could see her full reflection in the table, and it wasn’t pretty. Basically, she looked like death had taken a nice big bite out of her, decided she tasted nasty, and spat her back out. There were staples instead of sutures running in five long lines across her ribs and around to her lower back, a bandage around her right hand from when she’d thrown the punch, and a roll of bandages around her ribs so tight that it felt like a corset.

The door opened suddenly, and Felicity grabbed for the sheet, yanking it tight around her shoulders.

"Glad to see you’re awake, Miss Smoak," said Amanda Waller.
Felicity's mouth was still open as Waller closed the door behind her with a soft click and made her way across the room. She opened a drawer and set a tiny bottle of a clear liquid on the table beside Felicity, along with a hypodermic needle that made her skin crawl.

"You'll notice we didn't give you an anesthetic," she said, tapping the top of the painkiller bottle with a tapered fingernail. "That could easily be remedied, of course. Three cracked ribs and cuts like that shouldn't be left to sting."

Felicity was tempted. But needles always made her think twice. Along with the fact that it was Amanda Waller, Crazy Drone Lady. If she was giving out painkillers from the goodness of her heart, Felicity was going to join a gym.

"What's the catch?" Felicity asked, instinctively tightening the sheet around her body. Girls on TV always made it look seductive, having nothing but a sheet on. Felicity made it look like a sloppy burrito, which wasn't helping at all.

Waller inclined her head.

"We received your tip and took the kidnapped children into our custody. Very well done, Miss Smoak. You've done ARGUS a great service. One of the boys," Waller said, as detachedly as if she was speaking about an inanimate object, "as I'm sure you know, happens to be my son. He was abducted six months ago, and I'm very grateful to have him back with me. I may not be an ideal mother, but I do what I can."

Wrong, Felicity thought. Her mother worked sixty-hour weeks as a cocktail waitress as a single mom, to give her only daughter a way out of the life she'd been assigned to by the simple accident of birth.

If Amanda Waller wanted to be a mother, she'd try a lot harder.

When Felicity stayed silent, and as though Waller could tell her maternal appeal had failed, she nudged the syringe into a spin, the needle tip glinting as it rotated in a lazy circle. Felicity's throat had gone dry, and the ache in her ribs — present every second she breathed — was a powerful persuasion.

"I know how you work," Felicity said, wincing as she shifted her position, away from Waller's side of the table. "I know what ARGUS does, and I know what you do to people like Deadshot and Carrie Cutter. You can't charm me, so what do you really want?"

Waller didn't even flinch when she mentioned the Suicide Squad, like a bunch of criminals forced to work for her with bombs implanted in the base of their skulls was just a regular Tuesday. But she did look amused at Felicity's frankness.

"Have you considered a future in ARGUS?" Waller asked, her stare as intense as Nyssa's, fixed on Felicity's face.

"What?"

Waller smiled in a not-very-nice way, bordering on smug. "You're the resident hacker of the vigilante team, correct? Traffic cameras, satellites, corporate mainframes, federal systems — went to MIT on a scholarship, graduated Class of 2009, Vice-President of one of the most successful businesses in the country, writer of the Brother Eye virus that shut down Starling City last year. Felicity Meghan Smoak. Did I leave anything out?"

Whoa.
"Um, I'm kind of in the middle of something here," Felicity said, with unspeakable awkwardness. "Three broken ribs, and I lost a fight with a very angry cat, as you can see from the unattractive staples."

Waller shrugged. "ARGUS recruits assets. Oliver Queen could join you, if that's your concern. So could the rest of your team. If you think about it, the whole debacle of last year could have been avoided if Oliver Queen worked for me, instead of himself. ARGUS takes care of its own. He could have marshaled this organization's resources against the League, instead of slipping away in the night. You needn't have lost him for a year if the both of you worked under ARGUS."

It was Felicity's turn to ignore Waller's underlying insinuation. Instead, she went on the defensive. "Oliver gave himself up because he didn't see a choice. That is reason number one why you should re-evaluate trying to get Oliver into ARGUS. That guy redefines tunnel vision, he doesn't play well with others, and he isn't exactly emotionally stable. Not a great choice."

There was a pause as Felicity tried to remember her point, outside of the Oliver-bashing.

"And I have no verbal filter," she said, awkwardly. "There is no way I could work for a secret government organization without spilling torture reports — not — that I'm saying you guys torture people, you just stuff bombs into their skulls and blow them up if they don't follow orders...which is worse." Felicity wondered if she was going to get killed. "Anyway, I think the answer is no," she finished, lamely.

Waller crossed her arms. Her expression hadn't changed at all, not through Felicity's daily word vomit.

"Do you speak for yourself?" she asked, slowly. "Or Oliver Queen as well?"

Felicity felt her cheeks flame.

"I can't say I approve of your personal taste," Waller said bluntly, "but the offer still stands. When you realize, eventually, that being tech support to a vigilante with — how did you put it? — tunnel vision means that Oliver Queen will never have eyes for anything except the work he does for Starling City. Now where does that leave you?"

Waller's mouth curled like she'd just reached checkmate. And she had. She'd just said what Felicity knew, the speck of darkness in her hopes. Oliver might fight for her in the moment, but he had a pretty good track record of letting things hang between them for years, because he'd focused on The Arrow instead of Oliver Queen, as if one came at the expense of the other.

It was annoying, downright frustrating, and it could be agonizing.

But that was between her and Oliver. Not a stranger. Not Amanda Waller.

Felicity reached out impulsively and brushed the syringe aside — but it ended up rolling right off the table in a more dramatic gesture than she intended.

Waller raised her eyebrows, as if Felicity had surprised her.

"I don't play mind games, and you can keep your painkillers," Felicity said. "I just want some clothes, and I need to see my friends."

Thank you and good night, she added, mentally.

For the longest moment of her life, Waller didn't move. Then, without a word, she turned and walked...
towards the door. Felicity thought she'd tanked it, that she'd gone too far.

Then, at the last moment, Waller looked over her shoulder and said, "Fine."

But she paused with her hand on the door.

"You might win the battle, Miss Smoak," she said, flatly, "but you'll lose the war. A man like Oliver Queen deals only in extremes. You may win your battle by returning him to Starling, but he will sacrifice his soul as the vigilante, one day at a time, until the darkness consumes him and it is all he knows. Know your way out, Miss Smoak. Don't let the darkness claim you too. Some people can't be saved, and the sooner you learn that lesson, the sooner you'll realize that Oliver Queen will break your heart."

"That's not —"

The door swung shut, cutting off Felicity's retort. Swallowing her words, Felicity stared at her reflection in the steel table, and saw the merciless truth reflected in her face. The sheet fell in wrinkled folds around her as her hands, flat on the table, clenched into tight fists.

You're just tired, she told herself, as her eyes stung with tears.

Just tired.

A tear splashed onto the spotless metal surface, followed by another, and another, until Felicity couldn't see her reflection anymore. But she didn't make a sound.

Chapter End Notes

Felicity's actually going to have scars after this, which really hurt for me to write, but everyone else on Team Arrow has scars. Also, it didn't seem realistic that she goes into Nanda Parbat, bumps shoulders with the world's deadliest assassins, and doesn't come out with some scars. Maybe it's just me trying to justify character abuse, I don't know (it's been a long day).
Night had fallen. Oliver's eyes stung from the cold wind and the snow that was still drifting down from the open night sky. He ducked his head against the wind as the ARGUS agents marched them out of the holding facility and through the deserted village. He heard Diggle's breathing beside him, Roy's just behind, because all his senses were in overdrive, because he hadn't seen the one person who could set it all at ease.

The dirt path beneath his feet changed into the crackle of frozen grass, parting unwillingly against the onslaught of their approach.

"Oliver," said Roy, and Oliver knew what he was thinking from the undercurrent of fear in his voice.

They were being taken out into a pitch-dark field by ARGUS agents, their hands cuffed behind them and unarmed, while the company was very much in possession of their guns. Oliver's imagination completed the scenario for him. Hoods over their heads, forced to their knees, the click of a gun and the muzzle pressing against their skulls. Amanda Waller wasn't one to advertise a change of plan.

"We know what to do," said Diggle quietly, and Oliver felt the tension in his body, echoing the fight-or-flight response in his own.

"Yes, we do," Oliver agreed.

The agents around them stopped, one of them abruptly yanking Oliver by the back of his shirt, as though moving one more step was going to endanger him in some way. By the abrupt scuffle from Roy's end, he judged that the others had been stopped in the same way too.

They waited, as the wind whispered around their bodies, and the snow crystallized on their hair and clothes.

Oliver heard the muted crackle of a radio, and one of the agents responding. The clouds above them started to glow white, and Oliver turned his face away from the blinding glare as it pierced the cloud cover and the air swelled around them from the roar of the approaching aircraft.

Felicity was really starting to regret her decision to turn down the drugs. Everything seemed to be happening in flashes — one moment she was pulling a sweatshirt they'd scrounged up somewhere over her head, the next, she was stumbling blind through a snowy field in the middle of the night, her hands cuffed behind her back like they were worried she was actually going to try running with cracked ribs.

She didn't even see the plane until the door dropped open at her feet, blinding her from the sudden glow. Her shoes thudded hollow against the steel hull of a military transport helicopter, rows of seats stretching down the side, waiting for the children to use them. But the agents took her forward, towards the front of the plane.

The doors slid open with a whoosh, and Felicity stared — at the whirl of computer screens and glowing tabletops with indecipherable maps and calculations. At Diggle, Roy, and Oliver — standing at the opposite end of the room, their hands cuffed in front, in the not-so-subtle vein of hands-where-I-can-see-them.

Then she saw the reason why.
Waller glanced up from the table she was poring over.

"Your friends are waiting for you," she said, with an edge of mockery Felicity knew had been carried over from their earlier conversation. "As promised."

Felicity saw Oliver give them both a measured look, and hoped he didn't guess exactly what had transpired while she was in recovery. That there was a specter of Amanda Waller at the back of Felicity's mind...until she could shove that conversation down the incinerator chute and forget that it ever bothered her. The semi-delayed realization that Oliver Queen with tunnel vision was an Oliver Queen with multiple identities, ones that were irreconcilable to him — even though it was just the one to her, the hero.

"Oh, I think we can dispense with the restraints for Miss Smoak," said Waller, as the agents hauled her roughly towards the rest of her team.

But one of them yanked her arms the wrong way, and it set off a red-hot spasm in her ribs. Felicity dropped to her knees with an involuntary sound of pain.

There was a faint scuffle from where her friends were standing, and suddenly Oliver was in front of her, lifting his cuffed hands to her face. But he wasn't looking at her — he was glaring at Waller, like she was to blame for everything (60-40, by Felicity's charitable guesstimate). It didn't help that Felicity was still trying to get her breath back, too dazed to register that he was touching her.

"She's hurt," he growled.

"Yes, that's what happens with three cracked ribs and no sense of self-preservation," said Waller. Felicity couldn't see, but she could hear Waller's typing fingers and her very obvious lack of concern. "Back."

Obedient to the command, the agents wrenched him to his feet and shoved him away from Felicity.

They did, however, give her time to stand — without touching her, an idea Oliver had helpfully painted as a bad one. Waller had already turned away, and was in conference with a few agents, ignoring Felicity as she used the edge of the table for support, gripping it so tightly her vision swam. But the pain was subsiding, a little better once she was back on her feet. She made her way to her friends, sagging against the wall as soon as they took off her cuffs. No time for the dramatic wrist-chafe after getting out of handcuffs.

"Hey guys," she said breathlessly, holding her sides. "Missed you. A lot."

Not exactly the team reunion she had in mind. Roy had gone pale, and Dig was looking at her with deep concern, like she was bleeding from the chest. Oliver — well — he just looked angry — scratch that — darkly angry, but she had a goodish feeling that he wasn't angry at her.

"Did they give you a shot?" Diggle asked, and she could hear the first aid instincts whirring inside his skull.

Felicity shook her head. "Turned it down. In hindsight, not a great idea."

"Why would you turn down painkillers?" Roy demanded. "Cracked ribs, Felicity."

Felicity didn't want to go into the drama about the syringe and Amanda Waller's job offer and what it represented blah-di-dah, so she settled for inappropriately-timed humor. "Wanted. Those. Aspirins."

It worked. Ish. Dig made an exasperated sound that sounded almost like a laugh. Then he said, "You
scared the hell out of us, Felicity," — and she knew that everything was okay.

"Won't do it again, I promise." She smiled at Dig, who nodded and smiled back. It wasn't going to be the end of the conversation, but that was what the long flight was for.

Roy looked like he was about to say a bad word, and looked wide-eyed at Oliver semi-imploringly, as if he could talk some sense into Felicity. Oliver shook his head silently, and she swore Roy rolled his eyes a little. But they all subsided back into their original positions, ARGUS agents quarantining them in the corner, while Felicity closed her eyes and tried to think happy thoughts.

She could hear the children in the hull, little jokes and small scuffles as everyone strapped themselves into their seats. She swore that she heard Kang's almost-cocky voice and Mia maintaining order. She listened until the engine began to roar and the floor of the helicopter began to vibrate from the takeoff, and she couldn't hear anything anymore.

"Hey," said Oliver, quietly.

"Hm?" Felicity kept her eyes closed. Happy, happy thoughts —

"I'm sorry."

Felicity shook her head. "Oliver —"

"No, I mean it. I didn't want you with me because I said you'd get hurt, and I failed to do the one thing I meant to. I was so distracted trying to get you back to Roy and Dig that I forgot —"

"— that I had to be in one piece for you to do it?" Felicity nudged him with her side, as playfully as three cracked ribs could manage. "Oliver, I went up against Cheshire. It was stupid, and reckless, and when push came to shove all those fancy self-defense moves went out the window and I punched her in the face —"

"— Felicity."

"— right. The point is, I take responsibility for what I did. You don't carry my burdens for me."

Oliver's side brushed against Felicity, just a little, then deliberately, as if he was standing as close to her as he possibly could. She felt the warmth of his body bloom against her side, and caught her breath — as he leaned close to her ear and murmured, "What if I wanted to?"

Felicity tore her eyes from where they were anchored on the opposing wall, and met his gaze full on, her mouth slightly open in surprise. She searched his face for signs that he was joking, as if knowing that would make her response any easier. But of course Oliver wasn't joking. He was barely at the express-emotions stage, much less the joke-about-them phase.

"You scared me," he said, staring at her with the kind of intensity that made her want to look elsewhere, even though Oliver always looked her in the eye when they talked, and there shouldn't have been anything weird about that, not one bit.

You scared me. Oliver had done that plenty of times, coming home to the Foundry, beaten, bruised, bleeding...dying —

Felicity always took it as a given that he knew, that he knew she was scared for him whenever he left the Foundry and took to the streets. Or maybe he knew, but shunted it to the back of his mind because it mattered less than doing the work he did as the vigilante. And she thought that the reverse — her getting hurt — would also be a given. They'd leave it alone and move on, because there was
always something more important.

But Oliver said it like it couldn't wait, like it couldn't be a given. Like it was too important. Like she had to know…

How much she mattered.

If there was a dim ghost of Waller at the back of Felicity's mind, Oliver was as close to exorcising it as she ever thought possible. Somewhere inside of her, the knife-edge of pain dulled, and instead of breathing quicker, Felicity felt like she was finally getting enough air. She breathed in Oliver's scent, reveled silently in the feeling of having him stand beside her and close.

Felicity slipped her hand into his, locking fingers, a beautiful tangle that she didn't mind in the slightest. Then she rested her forehead on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"I know," she said, softly.
First Strike

Oliver drank in the sight of Felicity's eyelashes sweeping her cheeks, the warmth of her living hand in his, and felt — not for the first time — at ease just by seeing her in front of him.

But of course it wouldn't last.

"Strikers in position?" said Waller, and a garbled reply came through in the affirmative.

Felicity's hand loosened, and she, like Oliver, was looking at Waller in mute apprehension.

"Amanda," Oliver said, taking a step forward. He heard a dozen guns being cocked at his advance, but he didn't care. "What are you doing?"

Waller turned, looking politely quizzical, as if he'd just asked something completely obvious. "Doing what needs to be done, Mr. Queen."

"Don't do this," he said, feeling the ground shake beneath his feet. "There's a plan — there's another way."

"Not one you're willing to share," said Amanda, her voice slicing across his skin like a blade. "Not one I have any interest in, if it involves collaboration with the world's most dangerous killers."

"Amanda —"

She turned her head aside to hear the communications. "Approaching target, Mockingbird. Location 4520: Nanda Parbat. Requesting final authorization."

"Amanda!" Diggle slammed into the table, restrained by two other agents. His face was flushed from the struggle, veins in his neck protruding as he tried to reach Waller. "You don't have the exact location. You could be killing hundreds of innocent civilians if you hit the wrong target."

"Oh, John, we know how accurate drones can be, don't we?" Waller tapped something out on the glowing table and sent it towards them, showing a mockup of the mountain ridge, Nanda Parbat marked clearly on it.

Oliver gripped the edge of the table in shock. She had it, as close as a stranger to Nanda Parbat could get. When he looked up, Waller had her arms folded, like she'd played her trump card. "You see, while you and your team refused to talk, the children — a certain Anton something-or-other — were given no such instructions. Needless to say, this is as much their work as mine. I told you, Mr. Queen. I'm only interested in the children."

"You're crazy!" Roy had gone completely white. Oliver knew what he was seeing — the Glades, collapsing again into desolation and ruin — the darkness they thought they'd destroyed. "You can't destroy a whole city."

"I was quite prepared to do it last time," said Waller, looking amused. "But John and his lovely wife pointed their guns at my head. Needless to say," she gestured to the agents around her, their guns drawn and pointed at the four of them, "I won't make the same mistake again."

"Please!" Felicity staggered, and would have fallen on the table if Oliver hadn't reached out to steady her. "Ms. Waller — you said your son matters to you. You said you cared about the children. There are children in Nanda Parbat too — they didn't choose to be born in the League of Assassins. You
can't punish them for that. Please." Her voice cracked, turning hoarse. "Don't make this personal."

"Miss Smoak, we both know I am under no obligation to listen to your pleas." Waller's tone was cold, unmoved. "As for the children in Nanda Parbat, you and Mr. Queen did a fine job of rescuing the only children that matter. For which I thank you."

Felicity was speechless, her eyes blazing dark in her face as she stared into the eyes of a woman willing to perpetrate mass murder for the sake of twisted justice.

Emotion had never worked on Waller. Oliver knew that. Now it was hard reasoning, the only thing left that might sway her judgment. The one thing that Oliver and Waller had — in the past — seen eye-to-eye on.

"What's your plan, Amanda?" Oliver said, his voice low and measured. "Call a drone strike on the League of Assassins and expect them not to retaliate? You can't kill everyone — that place is a fortress. You'll cause some injuries, maybe some infrastructural damage, but the League's been around for centuries. They will survive this — and they will come for all of us. Not just Starling. ARGUS too. If you give the order, you will kill us all. Let me —"

Waller held up one hand, silencing him. "—Mr. Queen. As I am fond of saying, and as I am sure you remember from our time together in Hong Kong, there are some people who only deal in extremes, and a League of trained killers dispensing their dark justice across the world…now that is an extreme I myself find impossible to tolerate. As you surely understand, extreme stances do require extreme methods to neutralize, and while your misguided sentimentality may prevent you from seeing the greater good in my actions, history will judge that my hands are clean of any injustice."

"Say what you want, Amanda," Oliver said, through gritted teeth. "But the League's justice and your idea of justice are one and the same. Guilty until proven innocent. One warped vision of justice for another. Except now, you are killing innocent people outside the League, because there will be war, and war brings collateral damage. Ra's al Ghul does not forget. He will not stop until he has a sword at your throat and he can kill you himself."

A silence fell, the animosity crackling between Oliver's side and Waller's, battle lines being drawn, sides being chosen.

Oliver would never choose hers.

And she knew it.

The line crackled. "Mockingbird, requesting final authorization."

Waller's eyes glittered, opaque as dark glass. With a smooth, unconcerned swipe of her hand, she opened the communications channel. Felicity covered her mouth, breathing low and hoarse in her throat.

"This is Mockingbird. Authorization given. Commence the strike."

"Received."

Mutely, Oliver stared at Waller. He could do nothing, because what else was there to do? They were a few thousand feet in the air, away from the drones soaring towards Nanda Parbat, powerless to stop the spark from igniting the flames of war.

"When two irreconcilable ideologies fight for dominance, there will always be a reckoning. I simply will not make the mistake of waiting for their first shot." Waller had brought up the image of Nanda
Parbat, the mountains covered in tranquil snow.

Oliver turned his face away as the first explosion erupted in a hail of fire and smoke. He felt Felicity shake beside him, but he couldn't say anything, he couldn't respond to her distress. Not when he was feeling exactly the same. He saw the city, the people outside the League, trained for war but without blood on their hands. The children who could play on rooftops and light fireworks, the old women who guarded babies with tender care and gossiped at the side of the road — the lives built inside an impossible mountain, away from the terrors of the outside world.

In the castle, Ra's al Ghul, watching as the city shuddered from the force of the strike, stone and fire raining down, the darkness descending across the city. Oliver could hope that Ra's died in the strike, along with the worst of the League, but he knew better than to expect it.

Oliver couldn't return to Nanda Parbat, even if he wanted to. Ra's al Ghul would know by now that he was missing, and the drone strike coinciding with his disappearance — it would be a betrayal revealed, pure and simple. And Ra's al Ghul was not one to delay his revenge. The darkness would reach Starling City, and everyone would be consumed in the ensuing war. And for one of the few times in his life, he didn't know if he could fight the war on his own.

"You've doomed us all," he said, dully.

Amanda Waller had declared war. Now they would have to deal with the fallout.
Felicity never planned on sleeping — not after witnessing a mass extermination. But pain and bone-deep tiredness won out, and she eventually switched off, free-falling into a tangle of nightmares and twisted memories she didn't remember.

When she woke, it was because the plane had jolted from turbulence. She blinked, momentarily forgetting the what and why of everything. For a long minute, she kept her eyes closed, feeling only the cold steel against her back (which still stung) and the roar of the engine beneath her feet. Roy and Diggle were asleep on either side of her, breathing steadily the sleep of the exhausted, but Oliver was nowhere to be seen.

The room had gone dark, the only light coming from the computers, manned by silent ARGUS agents. Felicity didn't have to look very hard before she saw a familiar silhouette leaning against the table, arms folded. Three guesses as to what he was looking at.

Felicity knew that he wouldn't sleep. Complete physical and mental exhaustion was zero reason for Oliver Queen to do anything, even shut his eyes and recharge for a few hours like a normal human being.

Felicity picked herself up off the floor and padded silently over to Oliver, who didn't stir at her approach. She took one look at his unmoving profile and rigid posture and climbed onto the edge of the table so they were shoulder-to-shoulder. The screens he faced were still showing Nanda Parbat, the damage assessments made by the ARGUS satellites after the strike.

"Hey," she said, quietly. "Pointless question, but are you okay?"

Oliver made a noise in his throat, which could have been either a yes or no, probably neither. "You?" he asked.

"Worried." She shook her head at the inadequacy of that very mundane word to describe what she was feeling. What she felt was a mixture of falling without a parachute and the foreboding sense of doom that came from poking the bear — a ninja-trained bear with infinite knowledge of how to kill.

Oliver nodded, like he understood. "Go back to sleep."

"I'll sleep if you do."

Oliver exhaled slowly. "I don't sleep."

"Then talk," Felicity said, tilting her head to see what little of his face wasn't in shadow. They were as good as alone in the room, a distance away from the agents. Watched, probably, but not heard. Just them, sitting in half-darkness, exchanging thoughts. Trying to, anyway. "Talk through this."

Oliver was silent for a long moment, but she was content to wait him out.

"I don't see Waller letting us leave," he said. "She'll want to detain us, make sure we stay within reach. This is a chess game to her, and she wants all her pieces assembled on the board."

Felicity nodded. She'd been expecting that, what with the handcuffs and the agents guarding them. "Are you going to fight her on it?" she asked, quietly.

Oliver shrugged. "Not sure what they point would be. I won't be of use to anyone if I'm locked up in
an ARGUS prison."

"Might make it easier to keep an eye on you," Felicity said, lightly.

Oliver made a noise of semi-amusement.

"That's not the only thing keeping you awake. What else?"

"Felicity —"

"What else?"

"I...I don't —" He sighed. "I don't know what we're going to do, when we get back back to Starling. I can't think." Oliver rubbed his jaw in an unconsciously weary gesture. "I keep seeing the League's army. They've prepared for war all their lives, and ARGUS can't fight them, because they don't know how."

"You could teach them," Felicity suggested. "You know how the League fights, and you survived it."

"Train ARGUS agents?" Oliver's tone had even less enthusiasm than it usually did.

"I'm not any happier about this than you are. But not all ARGUS agents are like Waller," she reminded him, against the voice at the back of her head that told her ARGUS was not the kind of organization they were supposed to merge with. "Some of them are like Lyla, good people trying to do what needs to be done. Some of them are soldiers just following orders. War's not exactly the ideal time to talk about saving lives, but you could save some, if you trained them to fight the League."

Oliver was silent for a while, and Felicity hoped it was because he was mulling over her suggestion. "I keep thinking it's just going to be the four of us," he said. "Not an army. Just us, back in the Foundry."

She shut her eyes briefly, remembering. It was true that they'd always fought their own wars as Team Arrow, and a part of her wasn't sure if she was okay with expanding that tradition. But good sense won out. There was no way the four of them could go up against an army of assassins without some numbers.

"Stakes are higher, Oliver. But we're still together. We're still fighting. Roy might be a little harder to convince, but maybe you could give him a raise."

Oliver laughed, and Felicity smiled at the sound, looking down at her feet.

"And you?" he asked, his voice low. "What's your raise?"

It was Felicity's turn to sigh. "You couldn't afford me, Oliver Queen."

"You're right," he said, and his side pressed warmly against hers, because he wasn't leaning away. "Thank you, Felicity."

"Anytime," she answered, and they stayed side by side in the semi-darkness, waiting for the dawn.

Dawn found them in an unmarked ARGUS van, handcuffed and supervised by half a dozen agents
with stun guns. Oliver exchanged glances with Dig, who looked just as resigned as he did.

"Anyone else getting carsick?" Felicity asked, ruefully rubbing her forehead from where it smacked the glass. Oliver knew her ribs had to be paining her, especially since the handcuffs forced her arms to press against her sides, and because she'd declined painkillers for some unknown reason. Something to do with Waller, probably.

"You should get a shot when we reach ARGUS," said Diggle, leaning forward in concern.

"I hope you mean tequila," Roy muttered. "Because I could really use some."

Felicity laughed, but Oliver watched her silently, noting the vividness of the old bruises that stood out alarmingly against her pale skin, how exhausted she looked. He knew that it worried everyone else, to see Felicity — the one usually unharmed out of all of them — covered with injuries.

"Did you see any of the kids?" Felicity asked, fidgeting in her seat.

The four of them had been prevented from speaking to any of the children, but Oliver had caught a glimpse from the helicopter window after landing. They were being brought into ARGUS as well, a stay he hoped was wholly temporary.

Felicity kept looking out the window like she was expecting to see them on the roof of the ARGUS van beside them, not sitting obliviously behind tinted windows like she was.

"It'll be okay, Felicity," said Diggle, with a reassuring amount of confidence. "ARGUS doesn't keep children. They'll just process them and send them back home."

Felicity made an absent noise under her breath, and Diggle silently glanced at Oliver, who shifted forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He knew Waller, and he knew that children trained by the League of Assassins would be a hard prospect for her to resist. He also knew that Felicity was unlikely to be convinced by his limited ability to lie, so he didn't try.

"We'll make sure they get home," he said, quietly.

"Is that your guys' thing now?" Roy asked sarcastically. "Prison-breaking kids?"

Felicity looked back out the window, absently bracing her side. "Just saying — if we're going to pull off another Great Escape, I call tech support."

They fell silent as the van approached the innocuous glass-and-steel facade of ARGUS headquarters. Roy shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I just hope Lady Macbeth has a plan."

"She always does," said Diggle, almost involuntarily. "Depends whether we want to fall in line."

It was Oliver's turn to glance at Felicity. She nodded, once.

"We'll cooperate," he said, as the van slowed. Waiting for them near the entrance was the unmistakable figure of Amanda Waller — and all four of them tensed.

"Within reason," Oliver added, as the van slowed to a stop, and Waller turned her head towards them with a cold smile.
"Welcome back to Starling City," said Waller, as they were marched through the entrance, disheveled and jet lagged, handcuffs in plain view — like it was just a normal Monday morning.

Most of the agents barely gave them half a glance, but nodded in acknowledgment as Waller strode through the foyer, her heels clacking against the marble floors. Her aides had already rushed up to her with documents needing to be approved, talking so quickly that even Felicity felt like they were giving her a run for her money.

Maybe it was the sleep deprivation talking, but for an organization that dealt in secrets and unspeakable acts — there was a lot of glass going on. Glass walls — interior and exterior — glass walkways bridging one glass wing to another, even a waiting area with sofas and flowers.

There was something almost forced about the transparency, as if it was trying to offset the reality of the organization. She was half-expecting to see children playing in the corner, like ARGUS was trying to give off the nope, nothing sketchy going on in here vibe.

They were taken through security without a pat-down (thank God, she always cracked up when TSA did pat-downs). Felicity knew she was looking left and right like crazy, but she couldn't help it. The fact that everyone else was with her helped — but not much. What also didn't help was being put into a gigantic glass box with a woman who just ordered mass murder.

"Sub-level 10," said Waller, as the elevator doors closed. She ignored the buttons completely, especially since they only went down to -2. "Authorization: Waller, Amanda."

Felicity's stomach sank as the elevator began to descend. The lights were swallowed whole by the darkness of the concrete elevator shaft, and as the machinery cranked sonorously around them, she couldn't help thinking that they were taking the long way down to the belly of the beast.

Sub-level 10 looked — to Oliver, at least — like some kind of military bunker. They proceeded in the bluish half-light, Waller leading the way around the twists and turns. The way it was configured reminded him of a place they'd just left, and when Oliver glanced around and saw Felicity's wary expression, he knew he wasn't imagining it. Reinforcing his point that Ra's al Ghul and Amanda Waller were not-so-opposing entities, Nanda Parbat and ARGUS's idea of safety were surprisingly similar.

"Your team seems to be under the impression that I declared war on an impulse," said Waller, as they passed through another reinforced steel door. "Your thinking could not be more wrong."

"I wasn't aware you cared what anyone thought," said Oliver flatly.

Waller shrugged off his accusation. "What's done is done, Mr. Queen, now I suggest you get over it and try to remember our common purpose."

"Which is?"

"Ra's al Ghul and his methods are a threat to the world. If Malcom Merlyn's Undertaking was a result of his teachings gone wrong, I'm not willing to wait and find out what his teachings look like when they are executed perfectly."
"I'm not disagreeing that Ra's al Ghul is a threat. I'm disputing the fact that you had to declare war when there was a perfectly viable alternative. I could have —"

"— You mean entrust you and your team with the mission, no questions asked," Waller interrupted, smoothly. "As I'm sure you realize, Mr. Queen, had I done so, it would imply that you have my trust. And I trust no one. The fact of the matter is, your team is ill-equipped to handle this war. ARGUS, on the other hand, is very much at the ready."

The half-light in the next corridor gave way to clear white fluorescence, streaming in from the outside. As they passed, Oliver saw the stretched expanse of a hollowed-out sub-basement, some kind of main hall that bridged the different parts of the underground bunker to each other, bustling with ARGUS agents on their way in and out of said doors.

"And how long have you been preparing for war, Amanda?" Diggle asked pointedly, pausing briefly at one of the windows. Below, a jeep carrying coded crates rumbled by, headed towards another massive elevator.

"ARGUS wouldn't be ARGUS without enemies." Waller raised her chin haughtily, like a Queen surveying her territory. "Like I said, John, I don't declare war lightly."

The door ahead of them whooshed open, and Waller strode inside like the place belonged to her. It was evidently some kind of central control room, occupied by wall-to-wall computers and the same kind of glass tables they'd seen on the helicopter. Before Oliver's eyes adjusted to the half-light, the ceiling suddenly blazed bright with fluorescence, illuminating a lone figure waiting for them at one of the tables. Behind him, Diggle went still.

Lyla tossed a file onto the table and folded her arms, meeting Waller's haughtiness with a steely stare.

"Did you really have to arrest my husband?" she demanded.

Felicity wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but the air crackled with things unsaid, a rare difference of opinion between Waller and Lyla. Maybe it was an unspoken rule that spouses weren't supposed to be hauled in all the way from Tibet. Turning her attention briefly away from her boss, Lyla raised her eyebrows at Diggle, and he nodded once, silently. Then they looked back to Waller, a united front of professionalism, the super spy and the soldier. Felicity observed it with a sense of awe, at couples who could just know — not guess, know — what their other half was thinking, even from opposite sides of the room. Even if she knew what Oliver was thinking (89.8% of the time), they were far cry from anything remotely resembling a couple.

Either way, she decided that her mouth would be better off shut. Given how tired she was, she probably couldn't have strung a sentence together anyway. She sagged against the wall and tried not to think of the coffee she could be having.

In the meantime, Waller seemed unperturbed by Lyla's irritation. "Agent Michaels," she said, irritatingly oblivious. "I thought you'd thank me for ensuring that your husband returned in one piece. Tibet can be such a dangerous place."

Lyla shot her a barbed look, as if to say: save it. "Can we dispense with the cuffs? We're briefing them as allies, not as prisoners."

"Two sides of the same coin," Waller said dismissively, but she snapped her fingers at the agents, who did as they were told and left the room.
The doors slid shut behind the last agent, and it was the six of them, alone in the center of an ARGUS bunker. Oliver, Felicity and Roy on one side of the table, Lyla and Diggle standing nearly shoulder to shoulder on the other, and Waller at the far end, taking up her own side.

"Now that we're all comfortable," said Waller, sarcastically. "Let's begin, shall we?"

Felicity shook her sleeves down to cover the raw skin on her wrists, tucking her hair behind her ears as she bent over the glassy table. Beside her, Oliver ran his hand lightly around the circumference of his wrist, his eyes trained on Waller and Lyla. Since they'd landed in Starling, he'd been guarded, throwing up the classic Oliver Queen walls to fence his thoughts from sight.

Diggle, on the other hand, was taking charge of the situation. ARGUS wasn't their territory the way it was for him. The few times he'd gone toe to toe with Waller, he'd come out on top, which she suspected was a vast improvement over how she usually left people who challenged her. Now he straightened to his full — intimidating — height and folded his arms coolly.

"Let's," he said. "Besides the fact that you're detaining us, we don't know why we're here. Half of us have no experience with ARGUS, and the other half have a history of disagreeing with it."

"I understand how this looks, Johnny," said Lyla, drumming her fingers on the glass table. "But you're not prisoners here. You've been brought in because all of you are at risk, now that the League knows that ARGUS is an overt threat to them." Her gaze was a little too measured, as if she was saying it for Waller's benefit. "We've put all ARGUS bases on alert, but for various reasons — another level glance in their direction, "— we think their main attack will concentrate on Starling City."

Felicity clenched her hands, inadvertently waking the computer-tabletop from standby mode. It glowed to life beneath her fingers — state of the art technology, to the point that even R&D in QC lagged behind compared to it.

But their encryption algorithm didn't have to be, not to her, anyway.

"What are you doing?" Roy muttered, out the corner of his mouth.

Felicity lifted a finger to her lips and went back to her discreet tapping. She flicked through the user authentication request using a bypass procedure she'd developed for use with Kerberos-level encryption — and, in theory, for stubborn Pentagon systems that refused to cooperate.

Bingo. She resisted the urge to raise her fist, because she was in. Time to see exactly what ARGUS had in the vein of war preparations, because knowing ARGUS, what they were allowed to see would differ largely from what there actually was to see.

"Miss Smoak," said Waller, so sharply that Felicity felt it cut into her ears. Beside her, Roy winced audibly (she filed that information away for later use).

Felicity looked up to find the entire company staring at her, Oliver included.

"What exactly are you doing?" Waller asked.

"Um." Felicity groped for her words, feeling like the kid at the adult shindig. "Not looking for Tetris, if that's what you're asking."

Diggle's frown evaporated, and he pressed his lips together as if he was trying to fight back a smile. Meanwhile, Roy cleared his throat loudly, and Oliver silently covered his face with his hand. Not that Felicity could blame them. She'd never been good and excuses, and since she'd lost a few IQ
points after Nanda Parbat, they weren't about to get any better.

Waller seemed to find it amusing. She quirked an eyebrow at Lyla, as if they'd had some sort of private conversation about her at some point.

"Fortunately, Miss Smoak, that's why we've brought you here. Your technological expertise is needed, since hacking — as I understand it — is a penchant of yours." Waller's was subtly mocking, as if she was daring Felicity to bring up the conversation they'd had back in Nanda Parbat, the one where Waller exhibited just how extensively she was aware of Felicity's hobbies.

Felicity swallowed. "**Hacking** is such an ugly word…"

Waller continued as if she hadn't spoken. "We need you to hack into flight records and airport logs, monitor air traffic in and out of China and any possible routes the League may take to get to Starling. We have some identities we're keeping on Red Alert —"

"The FBI has a decent facial recognition software," said Felicity, pushing her hair behind her ears as her brain went into technical mode. "Not that I have experience with it — I just heard on the grapevine that it's pretty good. It'll be a lot faster than waiting for a name to pop up — especially since there's such a thing as aliases —"

Under the table, Oliver's foot pressed into her heel, a silent warning about her word vomits. She kept talking and nudged back, defiantly digging her toes into his shoe. Wearing heels on a regular basis had given her a pretty killer tread, and she applauded his stoicism, especially since she'd made Roy's eyes water once when she kicked him (by accident, they'd both gone for the last Big Belly curly fry and it'd gotten ugly fast).

"ARGUS has its facial recognition systems, of course," said Lyla, going through one of the files. "But there's the small problem of League members wearing masks as part of their getup, and the ones we've managed to get a good look at are very dead."

Felicity intercepted a look from Diggle, and she closed her mouth. He obviously hadn't told Lyla about the gigantic trove of facial matches they'd collected from the bugs, data that was currently waiting to be downloaded from the secure server they'd synced their computers to in Nanda Parbat. As if everyone had realized this, Oliver's foot made a reappearance against her shoe, and she had to resist the urge to stomp on it. **I know, okay? Jeez.**

"In the meantime," Waller said, directing her laser stare towards Oliver. "Mr. Queen, I'd appreciate your involvement in our operational training. Your experience with the League is something I'd prefer our agents to familiarize themselves with in the training room — instead of on the battlefield. Oh, and take Mr. Harper with you." She waved a hand dismissively. "He could use the extra training."

Oliver said nothing for a few moments, giving Waller the full extent of his uncooperativeness. "If I can't shoot any ARGUS agents," he said, dryly, "there's just really no point."

Waller smiled coldly. "Mr. Queen, let me make this very clear to you. While Agent Michaels is telling the truth when she says that you are not ARGUS prisoners — that is not an unequivocal statement of the future, but a pragmatic assessment of the present. She is as committed to stopping the League as I am, and should you hinder our efforts towards that end, you will find yourself rotting in an ARGUS super-max, or a new addition to the Suicide Squad. Do I make myself clear?"

Felicity watched Oliver carefully. His eyes had gone dangerously dark, crackling with dislike for Waller. She had to admit that at times, she didn't see immediately why Oliver would disagree with
Waller (besides common human decency and morality). Despite the understandable difference of opinion when it came to mass murder, Waller's brutal clarity and her merciless calculation were traits she could see in Oliver as well, when it came to dealing with threats to Starling. So the fact that he could look at Waller like they were enemies…it scared her. It was bad enough that they were going to war with the League, but if Oliver decided to fight Waller too — it was a civil war they weren't going to survive.

Then Oliver smiled, but it was a smile as dangerous as broken glass.

"Your threats haven't changed, Amanda," he said. "We both know the difference between a hollow threat and a real promise, and if you put me in a cell — there won't be anything standing between you and the sword Ra's al Ghul will drive through your heart. Now that is a real threat."

Waller smirked. "Touché, Mr. Queen. I'm beginning to see how you survived Nanda Parbat." But her expression hardened to a deadly knife-point. "It would be a shame if you couldn't enjoy your time back in Starling."
Smoke blackened the mountain hollow, funnelling and collecting without escape, dark as an ash cloud blotting out the sun's fire. Nyssa strode along the city ramparts, her gauntlets stained with the blood of the injured and the ashy fires that burned in the streets below. For the moment, everything was under control. They were being told to take shelter further below ground, wait for the bombardment to stop, the aftershocks to cease.

"Father," she said, entering his chambers. With the braziers overturned and smoldering darkly, the room was smothered in black, the gilded dragons looming out of the shadows as she passed them, eerily alive.

Nyssa stopped instinctively near the last brazier and knelt in the blood red light, her hand resting lightly on the ruby pommel of her sword.

"Father," she repeated. "I come with news from the city."

"Speak, my daughter." The voice unfurled from the depths of the dark, like a foul breeze in the night.

Nyssa recounted the damage in the city and what the scouts had reported, leaving aside the one fact that disconcerted her the most. The fact that Oliver Queen was nowhere to be found.

"— they say it is ARGUS, father. They pride themselves in policing the world, building their kingdom from spies and criminals. They must have discerned our location somehow —"

"— What of Queen?"

"Queen?" Nyssa said, momentarily taken aback by the mention of him. She'd thought that she was the only one concerned about not being able to find Oliver and Felicity. They were gone from her chambers, and while their possessions had been left, her lieutenants had yet to report a sighting. "I have not seen him. He may be among the injured —"

"No," said her father. "No, I do not believe so. But there may be news at any instant. Come — wait with me, Nyssa."

"Always, father." Nyssa schooled her expression to show a blank facade as she waited on one knee for the news. For the confirmation of the doubts swirling inside of her. ARGUS was the name of the organization that hunted her, and other members of the League. They came from the outside world like Oliver Queen, and had been involved in the Mirakuru incident, using their unmanned aircraft to attempt razing Starling to the ground…

If Oliver Queen had disappeared at the same time as an outside attack on the League…there would be no salvaging the prospect of his return. The Demon would put a price on his head and every member would have a right to take it. For anyone hunted by the League, the greatest fortune for him would be death.

"My Lord," said a scout, kneeling at the doorway. "Queen is not among the injured."

For a moment, there was silence. Nyssa's pulse thumped against the hilt of her sword, shuddering with the revulsion of betrayal, the fury at Oliver Queen's thieving escape in the night.

A breeze lifted the hair near her ear — as a blade flashed past her skull and impaled the scout where he knelt. The body hit the ground with a wordless thud, her father's black sword protruding from his
A strange coldness settled over her, and Nyssa raised her eyes to her father's face as it emerged from the darkness like a body rising from dark water. His hand was bleeding from where it grasped the naked blade of a dagger, yet he unconcernedly coated the blade with his blood, anointing the steel with red. It was the first time in living memory that Nyssa had seen her father bleed — and despite the circumstances, it gave her hope. Even though Oliver Queen had set back her plans somewhat, her father could still bleed. The betrayal showed the Demon to be human still.

Her father twirled the dagger, catching the hilt in his bloody hand, unflinching despite the open cuts.

"Oliver Queen has betrayed us," he said, without inflection, without emotion. In that instant, he was the Demon's head, the hand of justice — not a King who had been betrayed by his underling. "Oliver Queen has betrayed my trust. Do you remember how the League deals with traitors, my daughter?"

Nyssa's eyes lingered on the blood-red dagger. "Yes, father."

"Good. Go forth, and see that my will is done. The streets of Starling City will run red with blood at your hands, but Oliver Queen will die at mine." The reddened blade glittered like a savage prophecy. "That is a promise I intend to keep."

Nyssa rose and bowed to her father in the hellish red light of burning coals, and despite not being prone to pity, she wished for Oliver Queen's sake that he was cold and dead in an unmarked grave, because the Demon had declared war.

Starling City would drown in blood, but Oliver Queen would burn.

Oliver blinked the water from his eyes. The powerful jets of hot water steamed off his back and clouded the air with mist. It was the first time since Nanda Parbat that he'd touched water without the faint stink of volcanic scrubbed the back of his neck and braced both palms against the slick wall, letting the water wash him clean.

A cold shower would have woken him up better, since he'd overshot his limit by allowing himself six hours of sleep, to make up for the hours he'd stayed awake on the way back to Starling. The heat helped release the acerbic tension from his muscles, and given the fact that he'd have to train with ARGUS agents later — it was probably a good thing.

Water still dripped from his hair after he'd stepped out of the bathroom and walked barefoot through the shared bunker space, careful not to wake the two sleepers. Sprawled on the bottom bunk, Roy was flat on his face, snoring softly into his pillow. Across the narrow aisle, Felicity was a mound of blankets in her top bunk, shifting every now and then in surprisingly restless sleep.

Lyla had done the accommodation assignments, and since Diggle was with her and Sara, it left the three of them in the same bunker space. For the time being, it was working — but two-thirds of the combination were passed out from exhaustion. Oliver had just poured himself a mug of black coffee when there was a tap on the door.

"Morning," said Lyla. She eyed the cup in his hand. "Am I interrupting?"

Oliver leaned back against the corridor wall, but Lyla stayed on her feet, wearing a preoccupied
"Everything all right?" he asked, carefully. "Is it John?"

"No," Lyla said quickly. "Johnny's fine. Watching Sara. I — uh — wanted to walk you to your session. I realize you start operational training today, and I just wanted to make sure you have everything you need."

Oliver's smile was brittle. "Amanda sent you to make sure I get there."

Lyla made a dismissive noise under her breath. "God no. I don't babysit for Amanda." She smiled at him like they'd just shared a secret, and gestured for them to walk.

"I've been talking to some of the children. They're not too happy about what went down in Nanda Parbat," Lyla said, inclining her head at Oliver, as though acknowledging a fault. "I might be bringing a few of them by later — they're being sent home, but they wanted to see you and Felicity first and I didn't see why not. Some of them are — uh — interesting, to say the least. There's this one kid, Kang something, who keeps trying to throw food at the agents."

Oliver bit back a smile. "Is that so?" he said, noncommittally.

On the way, they encountered a few agents who recognized Lyla and nodded politely, ignoring Oliver or at worst — eyeing him with curiosity. Oliver knew the training rooms were less than ten minutes from his living space, so Lyla's reason was — at best — an excuse for her to see Oliver without the others.

Lyla had a very steady gaze, very measured, not invasive like Waller's, whose stare stripped away the layers of complexity to impose her own brutal calculations on the observed. Lyla's was meditative, as if she was able to see the ambiguities as they were and appreciate the fine balance of the elements that made each person an individual — asset, or threat.

"I'm not going to escape," Oliver said, because Lyla was as unreadable as Diggle was transparent.

"Oliver," she said, stopping abruptly. Oliver instinctively glanced around. They were in one of the dead-end corridors, a sealed door away from the training rooms. Behind him was a network of hissing boiler pipes, and through the door was the muffled sound of gunfire from the shooting ranges. The setup indicated that she was about to tell him something she didn't want overheard. Lyla met his eyes, her gaze reminding him of Diggle's — when Oliver was about to get a lecture.

"I know you and Amanda have your differences," she began.

Oliver resisted the urge to let out a sigh. Instead, he folded his arms and waited for her to finish.
"Johnny also told me that you mean to take on Ra's al Ghul yourself."

"That's no one's business," Oliver said. "Least of all ARGUS's."

"That's no one's business," Oliver said. "Least of all ARGUS's."

Lyla gave him a look. "This isn't strictly ARGUS business. This is me speaking to you as Lyla Michaels, your best friend's wife. I know Johnny will follow you into battle, and I love him for it. But Oliver, if Nyssa al Ghul managed to take out twenty armed men and evade ARGUS alerts for the better part of five years, what makes you think you can take on her father alone?"

_Because I wouldn't have had to — if your boss hadn't called a drone strike on my alliance with Nyssa al Ghul._

Oliver looked at the ceiling in exasperation. "I know, Lyla. I know that John, and everyone else is at
risk because of the League, and if I could send them all away I would. But I can't. So I'm doing the next best thing — I'm going to do it myself, quick and clean. I could give you the line — that the essence of heroism is to die so others can live, but you and I are both practical people, so we know that there needs to be more. The agents don't stand a chance against the Demon, whatever tricks Amanda thinks I can drill into them within a week. Ra's trained me himself, and I'm the only one who has a chance of getting close to him."

"Why, Oliver?" Lyla asked, flatly. "You're not telling me the whole truth. Tell me why you're so adamant that it has to be you."

"Because he had me under his control," Oliver said, as the shadows at the back of his mind began to encroach on the brightly-lit corridor. "I learned his first lesson — fear — and he had almost taught me the second — rage. I was a blooded member of the League, and I was his protege. I was a testament of what the League's ideals could do, the hold they could have. For me to leave and abandon the blood oath I swore to him…I've betrayed him so fundamentally that he'll want to kill me himself."

"So you want to sacrifice yourself. Is that your plan? Take him down or die trying?" Lyla said, without inflection, without mockery. She was just quoting the subtext, as if she could show him how stupid he was being. "That's heroic, Oliver, and I wouldn't expect anything less from you. But it's my job to think about the big picture. What happens if you can't take Ra's al Ghul down by yourself? I have to think about Plan B, and whether you think so or not, Plan B works a lot better when you're not dead at Ra's al Ghul's feet."

Oliver didn't say anything.

"I've been looking at the reports, and I'm talking to you now because I've noticed some blank spaces — some questions left unanswered by the narrative. Felicity went in with you to Nanda Parbat, but Roy and Johnny stayed in the village. We found some tech in the village, and a satellite you guys set up under the ruse of being a charity organization. You were obviously receiving something from within Nanda Parbat, so it made sense to have Felicity in there, if you were setting something up. But a week later, she's bleeding out in the village, you have blood on your hands and thirty abducted kids with you, and five dead League members for ARGUS cleanup. I know you tried to go back to Nanda Parbat, but if your friends were safe and the children were out, why would you want to keep up the ruse? You'd risk yourself if the League ever found out that you killed those assassins."

"Like I said, there was a blood oath," Oliver said. "I was trying to honor it, or the League would have retaliated."

Lyla shook her head, like his lie was too obvious. "Read the reports for yourself, and you'll see how reckless you were, how many liabilities you took on — why they need an explanation. Amanda's seen the reports, Oliver. She knows about these gaps as much as I do, except she won't be trying to help you explain them. For the time being, she requires your help in training ARGUS agents, but don't expect that immunity to last."

For a moment, Oliver and Lyla stared each other down, not as friends but as two very practical individuals with a lot to protect — and a lot to lose. Oliver wouldn't have counted Lyla under the people he trusted implicitly — not like Diggle or Felicity — but she did have a measure of trust in his eyes, stemming from a degree of admiration and commonality when it came to their ways of thinking.

"Amanda has no reason to find out about this," he said, softly. "But there was an alliance. One of the reasons why I was trying to go back was to honor that pact. Nyssa al Ghul wants her father dead, and I was going to help her kill him in exchange for her releasing me from the blood oath."
Lyla's eyes were bright. She nodded slowly as she considered what he'd just said. "I thought there was a possibility of something along those lines. But now you're not sure about the alliance because of the strike. She might think you've gone back on your word. Any contact since then?"

Oliver shook his head. "I was going to get Felicity to monitor the Foundry — chances are that's where Nyssa might show up, if she still wants an alliance."

"Good. That's good." Lyla glanced at her watch and at the door behind her back. "You have to go, if you want to make your session. We'll discuss this later, and Oliver —?"

Lyla touched his arm, holding him still for a second more.

"Be careful. Amanda may try to use collateral to keep you with ARGUS, and for now, her opinion based on the reports is that you took those risks to get Felicity out of Nanda Parbat. I know you and her have some unresolved issues, but try not to get Felicity caught in the crosshairs."

Oliver thought about denying it, but Lyla's no-nonsense expression was clear indication of what she knew. So he nodded slowly, and she let him go with a smile that had more pity in it than camaraderie. "It's not easy having people to love," said Lyla. "Especially when you deal with the devil."
Felicity clucked her tongue as she went through the ARGUS mainframe.

"Bad eighties," she said to herself, passing through the gaps in the system.

The vents pumped chilly air into the already-frigid control room, making her huddle even deeper into her clothes as she worked. Lyla had put Felicity in the control room with the task of going through flight plans, and needless to say, she'd gotten a little sidetracked with the terabytes of ARGUS data at her fingertips. There were already eighteen bugs in the system (and counting), which would allow her to monitor ARGUS systems remotely. That — would stay between her and the rest of Team Arrow. She didn't imagine Lyla would be too pleased to hear about it, but it wasn't really her they didn't trust — but Waller.

Kang and the others had come and gone — but no Martin, and even though she'd never admit it, he was the one she worried most about. She had a feeling that he was as emphatic as he looked, and having a homicidal mother, well, that wasn't exactly something he could just get over.

"Everything all right?"

Felicity jumped, her head snapping towards the door. Lyla raised her eyebrows over the two steaming cups of coffee she was holding.

"Sorry," Felicity said sheepishly. "I keep thinking I'm still in Nanda Parbat. Undercover, and all that."

Lyla nodded understandingly. "I heard," she said, setting one of the cups down near Felicity. "You sure you still want this? I already have a hyperactive toddler back home, I can't deal with another one."

Lyla's smile was friendly, the kind of familiarity that came from a shared near-death experience in the Foundry and more than a few dinners at the Diggle house, especially after Oliver left Starling. Based purely off her turns as Sara's babysitter, Felicity could remember the lyrics to most of the Disney songs and the exact pea-to-carrot ratio that was the difference between a food boycott and a quiet nap. Yes, Felicity had very little social life, and Lyla never judged.

Felicity grinned, reaching for the mug anyway. "I never say no to coffee. Where's Dig?"

"I sent him to train with Oliver."

"You mean 'make sure Oliver doesn't lose his marbles in a spectacularly angry fashion'," Felicity translated.

Lyla hid her smile in her mug, moving to stand behind Felicity's chair. She paused, reading the computer screens. "I see you've moved on from flight plans. What's this?"

"It's your evacuation protocols." Felicity spun around in her chair, bringing up the blueprints and system commands. "Long story — I was bored and I was looking through some of your system's automatic protocols. So I saw this, thought it was interesting, went in to take a peek. Anyway, I think some rooms here have a secondary exit, made to transport quite a few people in case of — knock on wood — bad stuff going down."

"It's supposed to drop down to an underground railway, but that's…" said Lyla, reading over
Felicity's shoulder. "So you've been — what — just reading?"

"If reading means revamping the command system, because no offense, it looked like it was from the eighties. Not that it didn't work before, but I changed up some of the details and long story short — you not only have fifteen operational evacuation points around the base, you also have around twenty more seconds for evacuation, which could come in handy...hopefully never."

On a roll, Felicity set down her mug and keyed in a few commands. The far wall cracked into two halves of a door, whooshing aside to reveal a service-size elevator. "Ta-dah," she said, marveling silently at what could be done with the promise of caffeine.

"Wow, Felicity — just — wow." Lyla examined the elevator, bare as a pin and obviously untouched since construction. "This is...helpful."

"Helpful is my middle name."

Lyla smiled at her, but it was a serious kind of smile. "Take it how you will, but ARGUS could use someone like you."

Felicity averted her eyes, spinning back around to face the screens. Do not think of Waller and what she said. "Don't know about that," she said, lightly. "I'm still in the middle of my day job."

"That's what Johnny says. Oliver's very lucky to have you two," said Lyla.

"Waller's lucky to have someone like you around," Felicity answered. "And you are a braver woman than I could ever be, to be able to work with her."

"Being her second-in-command isn't the most glamorous job," Lyla laughed a little. "I get that you might not want to join ARGUS because of her, I really do. But ARGUS doesn't always have to be what Amanda says it is. I understand that you and the others have their disagreements with her, but so do I." She tilted her head, contemplative. "We disagree — often, and she knows I do — but at the end of the day it's the vision, it's the goal you never lose sight of. We want a safer world — we all do. As long as you know what you're doing to get there, Amanda isn't the be-all and end-all of that world vision."

Felicity twisted her fingers around the mug, holding the two irreconcilable images in her head — Waller, and a better world.

"Maybe," she said, jokingly, "you could call me when you're in charge of ARGUS, not Amanda Waller."

Oliver knocked Roy's staff out of the way and rapped him hard on the elbow, wood hitting flesh with a satisfying smack.

"Faster," Oliver said shortly, as Roy brandished his arm — flushed with a rapidly forming welt. They were practicing stick-fighting technique, one in each hand, as if they were back in the Foundry for the training session. Oliver personally preferred simple rattan sticks to the over-polished rolling pins ARGUS stocked the training room with, but he couldn't exactly put an order in with Waller.

Oliver half-expected Roy to resent his brusqueness, since they hadn't trained together for more than a year. Instead, Roy's eyebrows furrowed, and he steadily picked up the pace, until they were trading
blows with matching momentum.

Roy was a temperamental fighter, good with sudden bursts of ferocity, not so good at the consistency — especially if he lost the rhythm.

Oliver swerved away from Roy's next swing, causing him to falter. Seizing the opening, Oliver slapped Roy's stick out of the way and struck with the other, sweeping Roy's legs out from under him.

"Every time," said Oliver, with a faint sense of amusement at how little things changed.

"And here I thought the League would mellow you out," said Roy, wincing as he unstuck his face from the floor.

Oliver freed up his right hand and offered it to Roy. "Disappointed?"

Roy grinned and let Oliver pull him to his feet. "Maybe I missed it."

Oliver raised his weapons and said, grimly, "We'll see."

"So," said Diggle, "when are we going to discuss what went on between you and Felicity in Nanda Parbat?"

Oliver parried Roy's aggressive jab and sent him careening off to the side.

"What?" he said, half-paying attention.

Diggle wasn't fooled. "You heard me."

Oliver sidestepped Roy's lunge. "I am not discussing anything, because nothing happened."

Roy made a sarcastic noise, which Oliver rewarded by knocking him off his feet — again. Then he turned to Diggle, and tossed him a Bo staff of his own.

"Really, Oliver?" Diggle brandished the stick. "I can't talk to you without a weapon in my hand?"

"If Lyla sent you down to keep an eye on me," Oliver answered, "you're going to have to pull your weight."

Roy rolled his shoulders, making the joints crack. "I really missed this."

Diggle sighed and stepped into the circle, slowly twirling the staff behind his back. At first, Oliver wondered briefly if he'd forgotten the sparring. But then Diggle met Oliver's eyes and grinned, and that was how Oliver knew he'd been training steadily for the past year.

Their staffs met with a resounding clap, and Oliver grinned back. Then they launched into a three-way sparring match, a blur of movement and near-grazes that came back to Oliver like muscle memory.

"Come on, Oliver," said Diggle. "Tell me you at least talked to her about it."

"About what?" said Oliver, being deliberately obtuse.
Because of his size, Diggle's movements as a fighter had always surprised Oliver with their unexpected grace. As sparring partners, they were good opposites. Oliver had less mass, but he was quicker on his feet — and there was the short history of death-defying training in his favor.

Oliver slapped Roy's shins and whacked Diggle on the side.

"I can't believe you'd rather beat up your friends than answer a question," said Roy, still on his knees from the blow.

Oliver looked at Diggle, who was watching him expectantly.

"We're fine," he said, emphatically. "Good enough?"

Diggle rolled his eyes and resumed his sparring position. "I think three years is long enough, Oliver, but maybe that's just me. I mean," he said, dodging Oliver's swing, "it's not as if she refused to give up on you for a year — because, if we're being honest here — none of us did. It's not as if she followed you into enemy territory with nothing more than a few bugs and a laptop, and it's not as if she came out with the scars to prove it —"

Oliver blocked Diggle's half-hearted hit with the flat of his hand and sighed, leaning on his staff as he waited for the inevitable lecture. His shoulders and torso were damp from the workout, and his pulse sounded abnormally loud in his ears. He inadvertently glanced at Roy, who laconically lifted a shoulder. "If you want my two cents," he deadpanned, "I'm always with Dig."

"What, John?" Oliver said, panting as his breath gradually returned. "She knows how I feel about her. It's just that — the timing always seems to be…off. If I tell her and we get together, what then? The League will still be at our throats, and the odds are still stacked against us…so what's the point?"

Diggle shook his head solemnly. "Oliver, right now we're facing a war that we'd be hard-pressed to win. There's no such thing as good timing with a war brewing in the background. God knows anything could happen — today or tomorrow could be our last day. I know what you're gonna say about consequences, and I heard what you said about the odds — but war with the world's most dangerous killers is consequence enough for one lifetime. And the odds..." He smiled. "Oliver, you're just going to have to trust me on this. Having Lyla — Sara — having something to lose — makes me want to fight the odds and win. So stop thinking about the world for a minute and think about yourself. Is Felicity the person who makes you want to fight and beat those odds?"

Oliver was at a loss for words. Maybe he'd forgotten how clearly Dig had always seen things, but it was still a mild shock to see everything laid out with such earnestness, the kind of unflinching honesty that left him with very little to lie about. Not that they would have believed him anyway.

Diggle smiled at Oliver. "The team's behind you both. Whatever you decide, whatever she decides, we've got your backs. But that was just us trying to steer you in the right direction, in the interests of seeing some progress before we all die of violent unnatural causes or — God willing — old age." He tilted his head. "So what's it gonna be?"

Oliver exhaled slowly, filtering out the distractions by controlling his breathing.


There was a very dominant part of him that couldn't bear the idea of being with Felicity for hours, maybe minutes – only to lose it all in death. Not just his — the injuries she'd suffered in Nanda Parbat were a vivid reminder that neither of them were exempt from the risk, or the fallout.

But there was a very real part of him that wanted those minutes, hours, maybe even days with her, as
long as they had their time. A part of him that knew the hollow consolation of a lost maybe was infinitely worse than having at least one bright memory of what he'd known for certain.

As his pulse slowed, he realized what he'd been trying to hear all along. Oliver lifted his head and looked Diggle in the eye.

"Yes," he said, as if he was saying it for the first time.
"Bow and arrows," said Lyla. "And one League uniform, which you are not allowed to say I gave to you. How's the TX-70 working out?"

Felicity looked up from her laptop and grinned. "Thanks, Lyla. I just thought Oliver might feel better — and by that I mean less homicidal — about everything if he had his gear near him. And the TX-70 is a dream." She put her hand on the sleek black machine, and it caused her actual bodily pain to not stroke it like a pet. "Even though it hurts me physically that I can't tell anyone about it, because it's —"

"— classified ARGUS property, yes," Lyla finished for her, with a sympathetic smile. "Sorry."

Felicity sighed, and looked back at the screen, where she was running a program on surveillance footage from the club and the Foundry. So far, no Nyssa, which was both a good and bad thing, because it meant that the League wasn't at their throats just yet, but it also meant that it was another day of her not knowing if Nyssa still wanted the alliance.

Lyla glanced at her watch, then back at the screen. "That's the nanny," she said, in response to Felicity's curious stare. "I have to send Sara off — she's going to stay with some family until this all blows over."

"Oh," Felicity said, surprised at her zen-ness about the whole thing. "Are you guys…okay…with that?"

"Forty-eight hours ago, my boss declared war on a terrorist organization employing some of the world's most deadly killers, all without giving me advance warning. It's not my first rodeo, Felicity," Lyla said, with a smile. "And it won't be my last, for Sara's sake. Johnny and I shouldn't have kept her with us for so long. Amanda has a few ideas possible battlegrounds, but me and Johnny would feel better knowing that Sara wasn't sleeping in a building with a target painted on it."

Felicity didn't have kids, and because of her interesting parental legacy, the prospect rarely ever crossed her mind without a shiver of abandonment issues and unanswered questions. Her view of parents and what constituted good parenting had always been a little murky. No parent was perfect. Moira Queen loved her son but made questionable choices for that reason, Donna Smoak loved her only daughter — but that love at times was colored by the fear that the similarities between Felicity and her father meant that she was going to walk out too. Malcolm Merlyn as Thea's dad — Felicity didn't even want to picture it.

But Lyla and Diggle, the super-spy mom and soldier-crime-fighting dad, sticking together despite the constraints of time and location and personal danger…seemed like an example of pretty great parents to her, and it physically hurt her to think of them — and the ARGUS agents like them, with children, families, all caught up in this war.

"We're having Chinese at our place tonight," said Lyla, startling Felicity back to the present. "You should bring the boys. It's been a while since we had everyone over for a late dinner."

Felicity smiled at the thought of dinner. "I'll tell them. And — Is there, um, anything I can do to help?" she asked, in what felt like the understatement of the century.

Judging from Lyla's facial expression, she knew Felicity wasn't talking about the food.

"No, Felicity. But thank you." Lyla squeezed her hand and slid off her chair with a reassuring smile.
"And see you tonight."

But Felicity's smile didn't linger, after the door slid shut behind Lyla.

*What have we done?*

Felicity turned her face up to the hot water and pushed her hair back from her face. The real color of her hair showed more clearly when it was wet, and it clung darkly to her shoulders like waterweed. She started to run her fingers through the tangles, but she started to shiver as the doubts returned, and closed her eyes under the searing-hot water again.

There was something cold inside her, lurking in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't guilt — not at the role they'd had in this war, because God knew Waller was responsible for it. It was doubt. The more she was stuck in this limbo, the windowless underground bunker, waiting and watching Starling City, waiting for the axe to fall…the more she felt like she was groping her way around a room without lights.

It was the fear that she'd never take outside of her mind. The questions like how they were going to fight the League, how they were going to manage it if Nyssa broke the alliance, what she'd do if Oliver really did go up against Ra's al Ghul — and what would happen if he couldn't beat the Demon.

Felicity shivered again, and reached for the hot water faucet.

She hadn't seen Oliver since her comatose sleep session. Apart from the fact that he never seemed to sleep (ever), they'd both been assigned very different schedules, him with training, her with IT. Whether Waller had done it intentionally or not, she didn't know, and she didn't want to know. She had no interest in finding out what fresh manipulation she was twisting around the team, and she had very little interest in joining ARGUS, whatever happened with Oliver.

Thinking about Waller and her manipulations riled Felicity right up, and suddenly the water was scalding. She hastily got out of the shower and towed herself dry with something resembling ferocity. Being alone and covered in steam was her daily allotted time to be pessimistically fatalistic. Once she got out of the room, it was going to be full-on Saving Starling City — and Chinese food.

Good?

Good.

Felicity put on another ARGUS-issue sweatshirt and some jeans, smothering her head in a towel as she walked out of the bathroom barefoot.

"Frack," she said, loudly. Because she hadn't heard Oliver come in, and there he was, sitting at one of the breakfast bar chairs, looking preoccupied as per usual, his chin resting on his hands.

"Everything's been quiet in the Foundry," she said, bending hastily to scoop up the clothes she'd tossed outside the bathroom before going in to shower.

Oliver's bunk was evidence of just how militaristically tidy he could be, and Felicity in contrast liked her space to look like it'd been lived in. Not that she was a slob, she just wasn't aggressively OCD as he was about neatness. Either way, she didn't know what deadly weapons he'd been using all day for training, and annoying him was the last thing on her list.
"Lyla brought your bow back, just in case you wanted it handy for training, so there's that," she said, using her chin to hold a crumpled shirt against her chest while she folded it.

"Lyla got me the TX-70 — which is beautiful, by the way, and definitely on my Hanukkah gift list — so I've been hacking into surveillance feeds all day and running them through the program. No sign of Nyssa yet, but then again, I'm looking at a pretty narrow range of sources. Come to think of it, I should probably start scanning the docks too, but the coverage there is kinda iffy. Oh — and Lyla invited us for dinner. Chinese food, which sounds amazing, and I don't even care if they got it from Golden Dragon or —"

"—Felicity."

"What?" Felicity paused in the middle of toweling her hair, looking at Oliver through the folds.

Oliver stood up, holding his arms stiffly by his sides as he moved away from the table. Felicity immediately checked his hands — he was rubbing his fingers together, classic Oliver Queen sign of being agitated.

"Oliver…" she said, but she didn't know what she meant to say. Her hands were twisted in the towel and her feet felt rooted to the floor, like her body was already bracing for what it saw coming.

Oliver looked up, and his expression hit her with so much wistfulness and regret and yearning that she faltered.

Part of her recognized it from a year ago, in the hospital corridor. That part of her knew that Oliver was going to touch her, that he was going to apologize…and that he was going to end it.

_You may win the battle, Miss Smoak, but you'll lose the war._

Felicity felt actual physical pain in her body, and her hand went instinctively to brace her ribs, the other clenched in a fist by her side. But another part of her — the small warmth that flickered in the cold — refused the pain.

Because God, she was tired of thinking. Tired of ruminating, tired of letting herself overthink something that should have been just a yes or no. Either they were together or they weren't. Either she could kiss him and feel his hands on her skin without being twisted up in knots because they _were_, or — if they _weren't_, they could still stand beside each other as partners in the war, because her connection with Oliver Queen never started with romance and certainly wouldn't end with it.

Felicity inhaled so deeply that her sides hurt. She felt like her eyes were finally open. One hand, then the other, she laid both her hands open, palms wide and loose by her side.

"Oliver," she said, again.
Oliver thought he was going to lose his nerve. It seemed impossible that suddenly, he could just walk up to Felicity and tell her, tell her exactly what he felt. Felicity's eyes blazed lightning blue against her pale skin, and she held herself so tightly that he knew — every second he didn't say it was a second that hurt her.

Felicity's face was scrubbed clean and fresh from the shower, her hair a tangle of ashy gold around her shoulders. But it was her mouth that his eyes went to, because her words were so much of what he loved about her. Usually the words were as boldly colored as the deep reds and pinks she used on her lips, but today her lips were a delicate, pale pink, deceptively fragile because he knew nothing was further from the truth.

Despite what Oliver wanted to do, he remembered what he'd said and done in the hospital. He knew that if he kissed her first, the memory would hurt her and he didn't want the pain to color their kiss. So he hung back, gripping the edge of the table as he looked for the words. The words to make amends for all the false starts and the very real stops, the distance and the pain and the maybes he no longer wanted between them.

The truth.

"I came back from the island with my humanity put aside, because I needed to be the vigilante, and I thought the last thing the city needed was for me to be human. I've told you this before, but I meant it when I said that everyone was either a threat or a target or a liability — until you. I didn't know why I trusted you — a complete stranger — with the part of my identity that wasn't a lie."

Oliver broke off, glancing at his hand where it rested on the stainless steel countertop. It was a hand that was covered in blood time and time again — until she'd showed him another way. Told him the truth that he'd known but never faced, that there was a better way to honor Tommy than abandoning his identity, because she knew and accepted both sides of him.

He smiled then, a genuine smile at the memory of the first time he'd walked into her office. Felicity turning in her chair, her mouth half-open in surprise. Her smile and the tilt of her head when he'd told her the lie about bullets and coffee shops, because she'd always seen him, believed that he was a hero even when he didn't.

Oliver looked Felicity in the eye.

"I need you," he said simply, without hesitation. "You're my friend, my partner, my conscience, and my humanity. I just wanted you to know, because anything could happen tomorrow and a friend helped me realize that I couldn't fight Ra's al Ghul — and win — if I didn't tell you."

Even though Felicity remained motionless, there was a small, defiant flame behind her eyes. Her voice was low and went straight to the base of Oliver's spine as she asked, "Tell me what?"

Oliver smiled, because he wasn't scared — not by the truth. It was light, and the light that shone on them both — it made him fearless.

"I love you."

It was a weight from his shoulders, a burden that became a joy — to hear himself say it, and even more so to see Felicity's face change when she heard it. Instead of a fire behind her eyes, her whole face was alight with a glow, like she was standing under the open sky and sun — and she had never
looked more beautiful to him. Then, right then, Oliver knew that even if she refused, even if she said nothing, he would have taken on the League and Ra's al Ghul by himself, the odds be damned.

Felicity didn't remember it — consciously willing her body to move. She just did. One second, Oliver was telling her he loved her from across the room, and in the next — she was crashing into him, teetering on the tips of her toes. Her hands splayed across his chest with the shock of it, and then they were grasping either side of his face — the soft skin on her palms rasping against his beard — bringing it down to meet hers.

Right time, right reason.

She'd chosen.

"I love you," she said, and kissed him with the words still fresh on her lips. A yes communicated without words, because Oliver had all the words, and she — for once — was speechless.

Oliver inhaled, as if in surprise, but in an exquisite moment of instinct, his arms slipped around her waist, steadying them both as he kissed her back. Felicity felt the heat in her chest, her stomach, a dizzy headrush of pure, unthinking bliss.

When it changed, she didn't know. A spark burst into real flame, need became want. They'd traded places, Oliver lifting her easily onto the stainless steel table and standing between her knees as he kissed her jaw, her throat — Felicity was sliding her hands under his shirt, across the plane of taut muscle, and his hands — infinitely more gentle — were gliding across her bare waist.

Oliver's breath was unbearably hot against the hollow of her throat, and Felicity had the hem of his shirt twisted in her fists, yanking it over and off — but her breathing was getting more shallow, every pulse-beat shrinking her oxygen into dizzyingly low levels.

"Oliver," she gasped, falling back on one elbow.

"Sorry." Oliver's hand was immediately cupping her face, and his expression had done a complete one-eighty into anxiety. "I'm sorry — did I hurt you?"

Felicity shook her head, vehemently. "Can't. Breathe."

She gestured at him, very enticingly shirtless, but very off-limits as long as she could feel her sides throbbing in time to her pulse. Part of her wanted to power through, but the other part was aware of the logistics — and being able to breathe without pain was a big part of the activity.

God, the activity. Even her mind was ruining the moment.

"Sorry," she said, letting her head dip back in exasperation. "Moment ruined."

Oliver laughed, and it still sent a thrill up her spine. "Not ruined," he said, lifting her hands in his. She couldn't see what he was doing, but when she felt his lips on her fingers — the heat of his breath taking away the coldness in her fingertips — she sighed.

A kiss in her palm. Felicity closed her eyes and lay flat on her back, her hair fanning out under her shoulders, as her breath slowly returned. Oliver's kisses on her skin — asking for more seemed greedy, given their track record for one-step-forward-giant-leap-back.

Besides, they had to leave something for Christmas. Oliver, maybe we should just head off to dinner and finish this later. Sound good? Not really.
"This," she said, as if she was communicating her frustration to the ceiling, "is a whole lot of suck."

Oliver's beard chafed against the soft skin of her belly. Felicity caught her breath in surprise, and half-sat up.

"Oliver," she said curiously, watching the top of his head. "What are you doing?"

"What it looks like." Every word was a heated breath against her skin. Felicity propped herself up on her elbows and watched Oliver take his time, eventually undoing the top button of her jeans, then the zipper. It wasn't that she was disinclined to help, but there was something about the situation — the novelty of it, maybe — that made her more interested in observing Oliver's efforts. There was also another part of her that was too shy to move, given the highly unorthodox implication of what he was about to do.

Her jeans landed in a heap on the floor, and the stainless steel table chilled the backs of her thighs, while Oliver's bare chest burned on her knees. Chafing, again, on the soft skin of her inner thighs. But his breath this time felt curiously cool. Felicity stubbornly kept herself up on her elbows, despite the instinct to crumple and close her eyes. At a certain point, Oliver lifted his head and met her eyes. They were the same dark blue, ringed by a boundless summer sky — the same Oliver.

"Still ruined?" he asked, in a very different voice.

Felicity reached out on an impulse and touched his face, running her fingers through his spiking hair, across his jaw, like she wanted to memorize him. He leaned into her touch and pressed a deep kiss into her palm. She smiled at him. "Not ruined," she said, emphatically.

Oliver smiled back as he took her hand, and the other, holding them by Felicity's sides as he bent his head to her, and she couldn't quite keep still anymore.

"Oliver," she said, but she never finished the sentence.

"You were surprisingly quiet," Oliver said, later, "I thought you'd babble like you usually do, even when —"

"— I usually have no verbal filter because the way to shut me up is only known to a select few." Felicity stretched her arms out by her side, luxuriating in the feeling of completeness. "That was very nice, by the way."

Oliver's face appeared above hers. "I could tell," he said, and she flushed, making a face at him as she sat up.

"Oliver," she said, as he bent to scoop up his discarded shirt, and her jeans — among other things — as well.

He shrugged back into his shirt and moved to stand between her knees, his expression slightly quizzical. Felicity leaned in and kissed him again, her hand at the back of his neck, his hands around her waist. When they pulled slightly apart, their foreheads still rested against each other, and she waited her breath to come back — so that she could say it.

"Hey," she murmured, and she was remembering everything he'd said. About time and tomorrows and needing her to know. Well, she needed him to know, because she finally had the words. "Even if I lose you," she grasped the front of his shirt, feeling his cheek brush against hers, "even if I lose this —" she pulled away and kissed him again, softly, and said, against his lips, "— I'm willing to regret you, for the rest of my life. But for now — I love you. I love you, Oliver."
Oliver's hands reached up to cup her face, and she closed her eyes. Her hands closed instinctively around his wrists, holding him as he opened her lips in a kiss, and she knew that this would be their memory. Them, alone at last, and the truth. Even if they lost each other, this was the memory they'd be left with.

It would never be enough, no, never.

But the memory was the both of them realizing — at last — that it was better than nothing at all, and every moment they could be with each other was a moment in which the tomorrows were truly endless.
"Hi," said Felicity, playing with Sara's chubby fists. "Hi there," she cooed, as the tiny fingers opened and closed on her thumbs, exhibiting an already-terrifyingly strong grip from a one-and-a-half-year-old toddler.

"Fuh,' said Sara, in a worrying start to Felicity's name.

Felicity glanced quickly over her shoulder, where Lyla and Oliver were setting the table. Neither of them looked like they'd heard.

"As long as you don't finish that fuh," she whispered conspiratorially, as Sara clambered up on her unsteady feet and raced around Felicity, giggling. She had a mop-head of dark caramel curls and marshmallow cheeks, but her balance was a little off, and whenever she teetered, she had a tendency to grab Felicity's hair. Which wasn't great.

"Ow, sweetie, don't do that." Felicity gently untangled her hair from Sara's death-grip, all while Roy watched idly from the couch.

"How does Dig get to leave ARGUS?" he asked, his features bunched up in a frown. "Since when do we get a free pass if we're picking up takeout?"

Felicity waved one of Sara's fists at him. "You're pretty, Roy."

Felicity sent Sara running to her mom and finger-combed through side of her hair that was still sticking up. Over by the table, Lyla picked Sara up easily and gave her a kiss, while Oliver reached smoothly across the table to pick up the plate she'd set aside. He'd changed his T-shirt for a collared one, with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows for convenience. The muscles in his arm and shoulder had a fascinating fluidity about them, even while he was doing something as mundane as setting a table. Felicity knew she was staring, but then again, she was used to looking at him every now and then, as if it counted as checking in on him.

That was the weird part — how nothing really changed after they'd been alone in the bunker. Apart from blushing a few times when she looked at his mouth (for obvious reasons), nothing felt colossally different. She still creepy-stared sometimes, and he —

As though sensing her attention, Oliver glanced at her and smiled, in a way that felt like it was just for her.

Felicity smiled back.

She still creepy-stared, and he still smiled, like it was meant only for her. Nothing had really changed, as though they'd slipped into the habits of a couple a long, long time ago — before she even realized they were becoming habits.

"Whoa," said Roy.

"What?" Felicity turned hastily and was confused by the knowing expression on Roy's face.

"I think I just won my five bucks," he explained, not at all helpfully.

Felicity started to ask, except Dig walked through the door with food, and Roy bounded towards it like someone had activated homing mode, leaving her to wonder about those five dollars.
Felicity couldn't remember the last time she'd ever felt so normal. There was the small fact that they were in a military-style bunker run by a dangerous sociopath, but the Chinese takeout and her friends sitting around the table helped balance the scales.

Diggle and Lyla came back to the table after sending Sara off with the nanny. Felicity looked up, checking their faces even though she knew what their response would be.

"We're fine," said Diggle, as though sensing what Felicity was thinking. "She'll be safer outside of Starling."

Roy, with his usual sensitivity, nudged the box of sweet and sour pork towards Diggle and rooted around in his container for a piece of soy sauce chicken. Felicity chewed on the end of her chopsticks as she looked around for the chow mein, which she'd mentally called dibs on but wasn't sure anyone heard.

Across the narrow table, Oliver silently pushed the container towards her before resuming work on the string beans. She picked it up with an inordinate sense of pride. Chinese food wasn't exactly something to get touchy-feely about, but then again, it was the little things. If Oliver remembered her default dibs on chow mein, life afterwards was going to be a breeze.

Provided they survived the war, of course.

"What battlegrounds does Waller see the League coming from?" Oliver asked, as though he'd been having the same thought.

Lyla looked up at the ceiling as she considered the question, her chopsticks poised over her food. "She's monitoring all the major tunnels remotely, but she's just sent a tactical team to stake out the docks, major train stations and the airport."

"The teams are armed, Oliver," said Diggle, as though he sensed Oliver's skepticism. "Semi-automatics, grenades, body armor, the whole deal. They'll hold."

"I hope so," he answered darkly.

Felicity didn't think it was a good sign that he was doubting the power of bullets. Then again, she wasn't sure that he'd ever had experience with a gun, given the fact that it was the 21st Century and he was an arrow-shooting vigilante.

"Boys — we said not to talk about work," said Lyla, refilling everyone's glasses (water, since the bunker had a strict no-alcohol policy).

"You're right," said Diggle. "Oliver — anything to share?"

Felicity picked up her glass for a sip, wondering why Diggle looked so amused. Why Roy looked at her and then at Oliver. Oh.

Oh.

She choked on her water as Oliver smiled innocuously at Diggle. "Nothing at all."

Oliver turned the warm tap onto the dishes in the sink. When Diggle came over with the rest of the dishes from the cleared table, he didn't say anything, not even when Diggle planted both hands on the counter, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere.
"So," he said. "When were you going to let me congratulate you on working things out with Felicity?"

Oliver quietly turned up the tap, glancing over his shoulder at the living room, where Roy and Felicity and Lyla were talking in front of the television, a cantaloupe and a cutting board in front of them on the coffee table. Felicity was curled up in one of the chairs with a relaxed smile, her head resting on her shoulder as she listened to Lyla tell a story, while Roy was angling the melon in line with the meat cleaver in his hand.

"Nothing to tell, really," Oliver said, turning back to the sink. "We just aired things out."

Among other things, but there was no need for Diggle to know that. He still felt the heaviness of Felicity's damp hair between his fingers, the delicate hollows of her wrists, the taste of her on his lips.

"Mm-hm," said Diggle, with every ounce of skepticism he could apparently muster.

Oliver gave him a look, but Diggle just smiled.

"Besides," Oliver returned, "when were you going to let me congratulate you on getting married?"

"Mm." Diggle turned and rested his back against the counter edge. "That. Didn't think you'd ask about that."

"Wedding rings, Amanda and Lyla both referring to you as her husband...I'm oblivious to some things, John, but not to my best friend getting married. Why didn't you say something?"

"Must have been — what? — six months ago? Neither of us really wanted the blowout, so it was just City Hall, those two," he pointed at Felicity and Roy, "as witnesses, and Sara."

Diggle smiled at Oliver. "Not exactly in the spirit of a Queen family wedding banquet, but it felt right at the time — what with all of us still on high alert for any sign of you. Besides, the part I wanted you to be at was the dinner — the part where you raise your glass as my best man and say nice things about me and Lyla."

Oliver's experience with speeches were characterized by inebriation and general embarrassment to friends and family alike, followed usually by some kind of arrest and/or tactfully enforced retreat.

"Oh," said Oliver. "You really don't want me making a speech. But —" He raised a recently cleaned glass in his soapy hand. "Congratulations, John, really. You were a wonderful husband and father before you even married Lyla. I'm sure the days ahead will be nothing but happy for the both of you."

Diggle clapped Oliver on the back. "Some day you'll be making a speech that doesn't involve you breaking a champagne glass and getting escorted off stage."

"For the record, I was pretending to be drunk that time." Oliver wanted to make that distinction, for some reason. "I make good speeches. Except the last time I made one, Ray Palmer ended up getting my company."

"That's another thing," said Diggle, switching gears so effortlessly that Oliver wondered if Diggle had a mental laundry list of things to advise him on, or if he planned out conversations beforehand and laid traps for Oliver to step right into. "What are you going to do about Palmer and the company? I mean I know it's technically still Palmer Industries, but —"

"— you mean do I care?" Oliver gave Diggle a look. "Of course I do. But I have to think about
what's best for the people that work there and the city. Ray Palmer and Felicity managing the company isn't the worst-case scenario I could think of — they — or Felicity at least, care about the jobs they're saving and that's good enough for me. It's not as if I ticked off the right boxes when it came to being qualified to run a company."

"Maybe," said Diggle, picking up a rag to start drying dishes. "I know a year's gone by, and I haven't exactly seen you a whole lot during that time, but I know you, and when I mentioned Palmer Industries, you get this look on your face. It's killing you to see that man run your family's legacy."

Oliver neither denied nor admitted the validity of the statement. True, thinking about Ray Palmer and what he'd managed to do with the failing (and quite frankly mismanaged) Queen Consolidated did set off a competitive pang of jealousy in his gut, that a complete stranger was honoring his family's legacy more than Oliver ever could. Feelings of familial duty aside, Oliver wasn't entirely clear how much his feelings about Queen Consolidated had to do with Palmer himself and his obvious interest in Felicity. It was a selfish reason to want back his company, and that was why Oliver didn't act on it. At the time.

But if they survived the war, Oliver had a feeling that he was ready to try again, and this time, his feelings wouldn't be clouded by jealousy.

"If we survive the war," Oliver said, meaning it, "I promise I'll try."

"Try what?" Felicity came over with a plate of cantaloupe in her hand. She looked from him to Diggle, nervously quizzical. "Sorry the shapes are so weird — Roy has terrible aim with a meat cleaver. Cantaloupe?"

"I told Oliver that Lyla and I got married again," said Diggle, taking a slice. "And he was just giving me his rendition of the best man speech."

"I thought Roy was your best man," Felicity said, leaning her elbows on the counter and looking up at them both. "Roy thinks he's your best man." A beat, as she reconsidered the statement. "Roy's lucky he's so pretty."

They all laughed, Oliver included.

"It was a nice day, though, wasn't it?" Felicity said, resting her chin on her hand, her expression dreamily preoccupied. "It felt like you were there in spirit — but not like in a dead way — we never thought you were dead — I mean, the guy at the registry who I was talking to was convinced that you were — but then again he thought your name was Owen Queer, so I didn't really pay that much attention to —"

Oliver took her face in his hands, careless of the soap and water running down his arms, and kissed her full on the mouth — in front of Diggle, in front of everyone. Her mouth was slightly open in surprise, and it tasted sweet and light from the fruit she'd been eating. When Oliver pulled away, her mouth was still open, and her face was flushed. He discovered that he quite liked making her blush.

"What — what was that for?" she asked, her pulse thrumming beneath his hands.

Oliver smiled at her. "Just happy that things worked out."

So of course, everything started to go wrong from there, and it began with the lights going out.
Nyssa felt the shadows stir foul around her, shuddering with the breath of fifty assassins and scores more at the command of Ra's al Ghul's lieutenants and the Demon himself. Their target was the ARGUS stronghold in Starling City, and the lights loomed bright below their eyes.

So fragile. So naive. Through the glass, Nyssa observed the agents moving within the building the way a hawk surveyed smaller and more vulnerable prey. Oliver Queen had been reported to be in the building, but she had her orders, and even though she itched to put a knife to his throat, she knew that Sara would have pleaded something for her old friend. It remained to be seen whether she would listen.

The last time she'd raised a sword in Starling City, it'd been against Deathstroke and she'd had Sara by her side. The ghost of her lingered, whispered to Nyssa like the imprint of a conscience in her dead heart, thirsting for the Demon's blood.

She looked to him now, her father by blood, as though she deferred to his command. In all truthfulness, Ra's al Ghul in full battle armor was a terrifying sight — the black metal that covered his body gleamed like a nightmare in solid form, a warrior condensed from the essence of fear.

A terrified whimper came from the huddled mass at her father's feet. Nyssa kicked it, the heel of her boot connecting solidly with the ARGUS-marked uniform. A pair of bloodshot eyes glared reproachfully at her from the ground, but she ignored it.

"Father," she said, her voice rippling in the chilly night air. "The scouts have returned. All is as expected."

Her father's eyes gleamed large and black like a watchful spider's. He raised his hand, and the air shuddered with the sound of drawn bows.

"Begin."

In the murky darkness, Felicity felt Oliver's hands slide through her hair, the warmth of his breath moving past her cheek, then her ear — they'd both turned to look up at the ceiling. Thirty seconds of silence. The power stayed off.

Felicity started at the sound of Lyla's voice. "That's impossible," she said, slowly. "We're supposed to be on a grid of our own. The backup generators should be working — unless —"

"—someone turned them off." Diggle's voice was halfway across the room, and a beam of light shot suddenly through the darkness. He opened a drawer and they all heard the telltale click of a gun.
"Sweetie? I think you're gonna need this."

Roy grunted, shielding his eyes from the light. "The doors aren't opening," he said, pushing ineffectually against the steel.

"There's a manual switch on the inside." Lyla moved quickly to help him, working under the narrow flashlight beam.

In the darkness, Felicity reached for Oliver's hand — as if to reassure herself that he was still there, because he'd been eerily silent the whole time. "Is it the League?" she whispered.
"I don't know," he answered flatly, as the doors sprang open with a whoosh of cool air, to a corridor as pitch-black as the room they were in. "But I need my bow."

They'd made it a few steps out of the room when the corridors flooded abruptly with yellowish light. Emergency power. Oliver slipped inside the open bunker doors and returned with his bow and two rods for Roy to use.

"Now what?" said Diggle.

"I need to be up in main command with Amanda," said Lyla, checking the safety on her handgun. "But someone needs to go by the generator room and see what the hell —"

The hidden speakers popped suddenly with static, and they all looked up.

"—I don't — I d-don't understand. Please. Please." The words, spoken in a whisper, sounded ten times worse when amplified by the speaker, echoing in the empty concrete hallways.

There was a faint thud and a yelp, as if he'd been hit. Felicity flinched. "M-my name is Matthew S-Stark, and I am a m-member of A-ARGUS Squad Eight. I w-was sent to t-track the League of Assassins' m-movements. And I f-found them. M-my whole squad is d-dead, and I am the only s-survivor. I've been a-a-sked to t-tell you all — I c-can't. I can't!"

"My God," said Diggle. "He's just a kid. We have to —"

Lyla put out her arm. "We'll be too late. We have to find out what they want, where they are, and we have to contain them. Let's get going — main command is access-protected to high clearance level only, and it's our best —"

"We are inside your fortress."

Oliver tensed, and Felicity found herself covering her mouth. Her mind was putting the face to the voice — a face carved out of stone and eyes like the void...

"This is retribution, justice swift and deserved to the organization that calls itself ARGUS. To the Woman who leads you, I applaud her dedication to her cause. Few leaders truly possess the conviction to scorch a whole forest in an effort to exterminate the snake. But you see, the League of Assassins is a many-headed creature, and it knows no fear of death. For her failed attempt to harm my family, and my city — and to all those who aided her — I promise death."

"To Oliver Queen, who I know is among you, there is one lesson remaining, and I shall be the one to teach it to you, if you are bold enough to challenge me before I hunt you."

Felicity's hand tightened on Oliver's, as if she was trying to suppress his instinct to fight Ra's.

"To the Woman, I have one final lesson. You should always see your foe dead at your feet before you dance on his grave. As you can clearly see, I have come myself to speed your passing into the next life."

Felicity sucked in her breath as they all heard the unmistakable sound of a sword being unsheathed.

Lyla started speaking into her earpiece. "This is Harbinger — all agents, follow lockdown protocol. Hold your ground!"

Then there was a scream, abruptly cut short by the wet sound of metal slicing through flesh and bone, and the thud of a severed head hitting the ground.
Separation

Alarms shrieked overhead as they ran. Oliver twisted and fired an arrow into a League assassin before making sure the next corner was clear.

It wasn't.

Diggle and Lyla shot simultaneously. One assassin went down, his knife shot in mid-air. Oliver ducked as a blade whizzed overhead and loosed an arrow aimed for the knee. The assassin went down with a scream, but Oliver was already turning back to get his friends. Felicity had Roy by the scruff of his collar, as if to stop him from running out into the fight when he had no gun or bow. Her face was white from the pain of running with cracked ribs, but the tablet was balanced steadily in her other hand, patched into the surveillance cameras.

"Take a left — two hostiles!" she shouted over the noise.

Oliver nodded and fired around the corner.

Every corridor was a trap, and the fighting got steadily thicker the closer they got to command. For every League member they'd taken down, there were at least three or four corpses wearing ARGUS uniforms. Some of them didn't even look like they'd had a chance to fight.

There was a small mound of League bodies by their feet and bleeding wounds all around by the time Lyla finally got the doors to command open. They streamed inside before the doors shut. Oliver slipped Felicity's arm from behind his neck and lowered her carefully against a wall.

"...fine," she said hoarsely, gesturing towards the others.

Roy had a split lip, Diggle had a deep cut in his hand from a thrown knife and Lyla was bleeding from the arm, but none of them had time to stop. Oliver caught one of the auto-injector syringes Diggle tossed him and knelt beside Felicity.

Felicity rolled up her sleeve, her face white. She was holding onto one of the columns in a death-grip, controlling her pain with her breathing.

"I think I'm starting to feel my mortality," she croaked.

Oliver uncapped the auto-injector syringe with his teeth, and worked on finding a vein in her arm.

"I hate shots," she said through her teeth, watching as his thumb found the vein in her arm and she tensed, as if she was actively trying not to fight him.

"I know," he said, holding her arm steady.

They both knew she hated needles, but they both knew that she couldn't be holding her sides every time they needed to run.

Oliver's eyes held hers for a moment. "Look away."

Felicity winced, her breaths evening out, and accepted Oliver's hand to pull her back onto her feet.

"You are going to pay for that later," she said, lightly.

Oliver pulled her close and pressed his forehead to hers. "Looking forward to it."
"Oh good, you survived," said Waller, nonchalantly looking up from her computer. "Agent Michaels — I need you in secondary command. We're pushing them back in all but the eighth and second sub-level, but I can add numbers to that. We should be able to crush them in good time."

"That's not the point, Amanda," Oliver said, suppressing his fury. "You said you were prepared for war. This —" He pointed at the glass screens, showing the fierce foot-by-foot battle inside the ARGUS bunker, "—is not being prepared."

"They used one of the squads' identification to enter ARGUS. They were of course stopped in the lobby, but that didn't prevent them from accessing the sub-level since they kept the unfortunate Mr. Stark alive and well. They briefly shut down our main power, but I rerouted backup control to this room." Waller recited the facts as if she was recounting a dull piece of history, as if the fight for ARGUS territory wasn't happening before her eyes. "As you can see, we are doing perfectly fine. Now all that is left is to apprehend Ra's al Ghul, and this whole war will be at an end."

"Amanda —"

"Miss Smoak," she said. "You modified our evacuation protocols, correct? I've had to let one of my agents go to the front lines, so you'll be taking his place."

"My God, Amanda," said Diggle. "You're already ordering an evacuation?"

"It's my view that the base is an important stronghold I do not want to lose, but I respect the judgment of Agent Michaels, and she seems to be unwilling to sacrifice a few lives to make sure the ground beneath our feet stays ARGUS property." She pointed Felicity to a smaller glass table at the edge of the others. "So I need you, Miss Smoak, to make sure the underground lines are operating, and that the emergency seal doors will do their job. If we need to evacuate, we will do so, and quickly. Am I clear?"

"Amanda." Oliver had leapt up onto the dais and now stood face to face with her. "Ra's al Ghul wants you dead, and even if it seems like ARGUS is winning — if you can't find Ra's al Ghul it means he has a plan."

Waller's features shifted – a ripple of something lurking unseen beneath dark water – but they didn't lose their flintiness. "So what do you suggest, Mr. Queen?"

"Let me find him."

Behind him, Felicity made a noise of despair. Waller's eyes never shifted from Oliver's, but she tilted her head.

"No."

"Amanda." Lyla pointed at the screen.

Waller glanced at the image of a League contingent making its way towards the command center, and raised one eyebrow. "That appears to be an armed threat. John, Mr. Queen, and Mr. Harper — I think I'll require your assistance in neutralizing it. You'd better get moving."

Felicity jumped down from the dais, skittering over wires and empty auto-injector syringes (trip hazard), slamming back-first into the doors before Oliver reached them.

"You're staying here," he said, before she could speak.
Felicity wasn't planning to argue it. The computers in central command didn't require hacking to get into, and while Felicity could hack in her sleep, she didn't think dodging arrows and flying knives was really the best environment to try it in. If she wanted to keep the boys from dying, central command was the best place for it — even though it meant sharing oxygen with Waller the sociopath.

"That's not it. What are you doing?" she asked.

"Protecting the people I care about," Oliver said, looking steadily at her.

Felicity shook her head, quickly and reflexively at the evasion, her hands working behind her back. There was a buffer of space between her and Oliver, because touch was their mutual reassurance — and for the moment, they were both at odds.

His self-sacrificing tendency was rearing its ugly head again, and Felicity's stubborn tendency to Not Let Oliver Die was making an unscheduled reappearance.

"Not that — I know better than to ask you not to go, so of course it's not that." Her eyes flickered up, locking with his. "But I do know you well enough by now, and I know what you're thinking. Don't try to find Ra's."

Oliver didn't say anything, and Felicity pressed, because she knew that look on his face.

"That's what he wants. He's hiding because he wants you to go after him. Don't, Oliver. Please."

"If I kill him, then all this," Oliver glanced at the screens, at the bodies of the dead ARGUS agents, "all this hasn't been a complete waste."

"That's him manipulating your humanity, using it against you. He knows you have a conscience, he knows you can't let people die. Don't play right into his hands — make him outthink you."

They both knew when that advice had worked last, and it showed on their faces.

"I outsmarted Slade by telling the truth. I said I loved you because I do," Oliver grasped her shoulders, the weight of his hands heavy and reassuring. But she refused to soften — just because she and Oliver were together did not mean she was going to stop giving him advice he didn't want to hear. "I'm going to protect us."

"Oliver," said Diggle. He slipped another handgun into his belt, while Roy hefted the pair of double rods he'd been using since the bunker. "Waller got her son out yesterday, but Lyla said the rest of the children are still in the building. After we clear the hallway, we're going to get them to an evacuation point."

Oliver turned to Felicity. "I got them out of Nanda Parbat, and it's my job to make sure they get home."

Felicity shook her head, because she knew that she hadn't convinced him to stay, not at all. She looked at Diggle and Roy, and they turned away to give her a minute with Oliver.

Oliver's hands cupped her face, and despite her instinct not to yield, she leaned reflexively into his touch, her hands coming up to encircle his wrists.

"We still need more time," she said fiercely, feeling his pulse beat strong beneath her fingers.

"We will." Oliver kissed her forehead. "We will," he said again, softer.
"We will beat Ra's al Ghul, but I know that there's another way." Felicity kept her eyes closed, because she didn't want to lose track of her words. "There will be another day to fight, and you will take the fight to him. Just not today. I know that it's not today."

In lieu of an answer, Oliver's lips pressed warm on hers. Felicity nodded but she couldn't smile. His hands started to disengage, and she let him.

"I'll see you soon," she murmured.

He rested his forehead against hers — briefly — a memory of what they'd promised about time and tomorrows. Then Oliver had to move away, shouldering his bow and standing at the door with Roy and Diggle. The four of them looked at each other, four human beings whose stories had entwined — somehow — and become extraordinary. Felicity's heart felt tight and painful in her chest from the feelings she couldn't articulate, because they were really about to fight in another war.

"Come back," she said to all of them, "or I'll be pissed."

Diggle smiled and pulled Felicity in for a one-armed hug. She used her thumb to wipe a smudge off Roy's cheek, and he half-heartedly put up a fight before she hugged him too. Then it was Oliver. Their eyes locked over Roy's shoulder, and it was enough. There didn't need to be more words, more promises. He knew what he had to do — come back to her.

Felicity nodded, and moved away to stand at the wall.

"Ready?" she said, her hand on the controls.

Felicity met all of their eyes, but only Oliver nodded.

The doors opened with a rush of hot air and they slipped through the narrow crack. Roy first, then Diggle — disengaging from Lyla's embrace…and Oliver.

Who didn't look back.

As he passed through the doors, Felicity reached suddenly for him — for his open hand — and at the very last, their fingers linked with a shiver of something ephemeral. One — one more tenuous promise. She needed that from him, at the very least. Oliver looked back at last, holding her gaze for only a second more.

"I'll see you soon," he said, and their fingers slipped apart.

Felicity forced herself to close the doors, and when he left, she shivered, as if he'd taken the warmth with him.
"I think you have a problem, man," said Kang, standing in the doorway. He was holding a warped piece of iron in his hand, a misguided if somewhat admirable attempt at fashioning a weapon for himself. "What's going on? Someone pull a fire alarm?" He noticed Roy and gave him an unflattering once-over. "Who's the sidekick?"

Roy hefted the twin rods he held, as though he was itching to use them on Kang. "Where did you get this kid?"

"Oliver," said Diggle, watching their backs.

Oliver gave them both a look. "Not the time. Kang, can you get everyone to move?"

"Always," he said, and shouted over his shoulder for the others.

"You really have a thing for child-based exoduses," said Roy, as Kang streamed through the door with the male half of the children.

But he shut up when Mia came through the other door with the girls. Oliver chose to think that Roy was in awe of the fact that she'd fashioned a crude bow and a quiver of arrows for herself out of the same rudimentary materials available to the boys. Not because Mia was strong and a fighter and bore a passing resemblance to Oliver's little sister.

Roy looked almost guilty when he intercepted Oliver's quizzical stare, and cleared his throat loudly. But Oliver didn't press it. He of all people knew what it felt like to have unresolved feelings for someone who'd walked away.

"So what now?" Kang twirled the warped piece of iron in his hands, the scars on his forearms rippling with the movement of his muscles.

Oliver realized that most of the older kids were holding some crude weapon — either a broken dish or a piece of metal or wood. They couldn't have known what was happening, with the alarms and the locked doors. But they all had weapons in their hands because none of them wanted to go back to Nanda Parbat, not to their underground, lightless prisons — and they were all willing to fight for their freedom.

"They're not taking us back," said Mia, and it wasn't a question.

Oliver shook his head, a shiver of understanding passing between them.

"No," he agreed. But the children weren't going to fight. Not today.

Oliver's earpiece crackled. "Four hostiles, left corridor."

He'd just turned when Diggle's gun went off, startling a few children into cries. An assassin went down, but a few more rounded the corner.

"Queen!" hissed one of them.

"Get down!" Oliver ordered. He parried an arrow straight out of the air with his bow and returned fire, all in the same fluid motion. Like the League had taught him.
Ra's al Ghul wasn't anywhere.

Felicity had searched. Twice. And then some. No sign of Ra's al Ghul or Nyssa. They were either very good at avoiding cameras they had no way of knowing existed, or they weren't in the building, and without the facial recognition software Waller and Lyla weren't supposed to know about, Felicity couldn't search for them.

Felicity watched tensely as a second wave of ARGUS agents clashed with the League contingent, but her main focus was on the boys, fighting their way through the corridors with the children behind him. Her hands clenched involuntarily when Oliver narrowly dodged a flying arrow, but otherwise he didn't appear to be injured.

There was something fundamentally wrong about her being separated from the team. Especially in a war. The science-nerd in her knew that her unwillingness was just a reflexive response to massive uncertainty and complete chaos, but the Felicity Smoak who'd survived a van crash and a city full of Mirakuru soldiers knew that the team was the strongest when they were all together.

It was the kind of niggling feeling at the back of her skull that threatened to throw Felicity off her game. But only if she let it.

"Next corridor, fifth door on the right," she said, her arms folded because it was the only way she could stay still. "No hostiles."

She switched to the surveillance feed and decrypted the doors as they approached, so Oliver and the others could get the kids.

"Quite the team, Miss Smoak," said Waller slyly, without looking away from the main screens. "Just how often do you send your boys off to war?"

Felicity glanced at Waller, struggling to control her rising irritation at Waller's nonchalance. She was starting to take after Oliver in that respect. "I send them out, but they always come back," she answered, and she said it as if she could be sure it was true.

"You wouldn't have to," Waller said, loaded with the implication — of a job offer in ARGUS that Felicity was more than ever inclined to refuse, or her smugness at the fact that she'd seen Felicity fail to stop Oliver from leaving. Again.

"Oliver." Felicity leaned forward, typing commands into the massive keyboard. "Evacuation point — one floor up, two doors over. Holy —" She muted her side of the comms as something caught her eye.

It was surveillance of the floor below, one of the many battlegrounds against the League — except the agents there were dropping like flies. Felicity swapped angles and squinted at the screen.

The sudden movement made her jump. Some kind of black vapor erupted from the ground, and when the mist faded, the agents were on the floor, twitching faintly.

"What the…"

"Felicity!" The crash of metal from unseen weapons made her jump, and remember that she was meant to be making sure the way was clear.

"I see you," Felicity said, checking their path out. "Head up the stairwell, and be careful." She didn't say anything about the black gas, and the way it looked and felt like something she should have remembered.
Felicity divided her attention between the two tasks, watching the ongoing battles and activating the evacuation protocols. More and more agents were going down, succumbing to the strange black gas.

"Amanda." Lyla had noticed too. They were both watching the screens with grim expressions. "We have to pull them back."

Waller didn't even flinch. "Miss Smoak."

Felicity never looked up from the screen. Whatever Amanda wanted, she didn't have the time for it. Her hands were flying across the keyboard. The children were filing into the elevator, but they were vulnerable during that window of time and Felicity was making sure the corridors stayed free of hostiles.

Felicity breathed a sigh of relief when the kids were finally in the clear. She activated the elevators and sent the kids shooting down to the railroad, checking one more item off the gazillion-long list of things she was meant to be worried about.

"When Mr. Queen finishes his current task, I need him to find out what the League is using against our agents." Waller's voice was hard. "I assume you know what I refer to."

Nerve gas — paralytic agents — tabun — sarin — Felicity's mind raced through the possibilities, her imagination only limited by her lack of knowledge regarding biochemical weapons.

She looked up at Lyla, who nodded, her mouth downturned. She didn't want her husband anywhere near the bodies either. "But tell him to keep his distance," she said.

Felicity reluctantly opened the communications channel. "Oliver?"

Oliver bent over a fallen ARGUS agent and peeled back the uniform collar. He put two fingers to the bared pulse.

It only confirmed what he'd already guessed.

"Two minutes," said Diggle, his gun trained on the far wall.

"Do we know what it is?" Roy asked, adjusting his grip on the rods.

"Blisters? Pupil dilation? Any excessive secretions?" He could hear Felicity typing at triple-speed. "Are they having trouble breathing? Are you having trouble breathing?"

Oliver peeled back an eyelid, and saw only the whites of the eyes — because the pupils were moving too rapidly to register.

"Nothing," he said, quietly, as if to himself. "They're dreaming — or hallucinating." Oliver moved further along the trail of ARGUS uniforms and towards the only black-robed body in the hallway. This death was probably an accident, a random shot fired by an agent losing control of his limbs. There was a mass of blood and clumped flesh where the skull should have been a smooth line, so he was relatively certain that it wasn't feigned death.

Roy gulped, loudly, as Oliver turned the corpse over.

"Plenty of time for an autopsy if we survive this, Oliver," said Diggle, his eyes not leaving the far wall.

It wasn't the brain injury Oliver was interested in. He lifted the hood with a faint unsticking noise and
looked at the face. It was half-covered by a metallic face-guard, one that left the eyes unobscured but snugly covered the mouth and nose.

Oliver touched his earpiece. "Felicity, check the other hallways. Are all the assassins wearing some kind of mask that covers their mouth?"

"I take it from your tone that it isn't just a weird fashion statement," she said, over the sound of rapid typing. "From what I can tell...it's dress-up day for the Psychos in Black. What is it — some kind of gas mask?"

"Probably." He exhaled and grasped the head by the tattered hood.

The mask squelched as it came away from the film of coagulated blood.

Even Diggle looked disgusted. "Please tell me there's a reason you did that."

Oliver stood, rust flakes showering the ground around him. "Felicity, tell Amanda to give the order. We have to retreat. This gas — it's from the Pit."
"They're en-route," Felicity said to Lyla, who was watching the computers beside her. The surveillance images showed remaining ARGUS squads regrouping and securing their way out. They were destroying key documents, erasing computers, hitting the self-destruct on all sorts of R&D gadgets they kept in lockdown. All that was left was for Felicity to hit start on the evacuation protocols.

But Waller was still fighting them.

"Agent Michaels — just what do you think you're doing?"

Felicity looked tensely from Lyla to Waller. Lyla had technically bypassed Waller by contacting every agent still in possession of their secure line and authorizing the evac, but Waller was a reasonable woman — if slightly sociopathic. Surely she'd understand that a bunker wasn't worth the lives of every ARGUS agent in it.

Apparently not.

"Saving the lives that can be saved," Lyla answered. "We can't lose all our agents here today. You know this, Amanda. Oliver's right — if the League really is using some kind of hallucinogenic, we can't fight it. Not today. They were drawing us out on purpose, because they know we're not prepared for it."

Waller's eyes were flinty. "I'm not disputing the fact that we're in an undesirable position — but to pull back now would be a catastrophe, with the numbers we've lost." She drummed her fingers on the table, thinking. "Ra's al Ghul wants my head, correct? An admirably honest position, but highly impractical — because he has to do it himself. Instead of retreat, I say we get our agents on the defensive and make him think victory is within his grasp."

"Which is your head coming off," Felicity reminded her. "Just so we're clear."

"My head," said Waller, coolly, "is my concern, Miss Smoak. And so are ARGUS's objectives, as you all seem to forget. If Ra's al Ghul thinks that victory is near, he'll come out of hiding and that is when we strike."

"You can't fight him," Felicity said, shaking her head. "You can't predict him — the only person I know who has a chance against Ra's is Oliver, and he knows that we can't win today."

She'd said the wrong thing.

"I am still head of ARGUS. My executive vote is a no. I'm not proposing that our agents engage in active combat. I merely propose that they strategically retreat within the premises. We do not abandon this facility until we find Ra's al Ghul."

Felicity could sense Lyla's agitation, as the minutes piled up and so did the bodies. Her arm moved slowly in Felicity's peripheral vision, but she never took her eyes off Waller.

"I'm sorry, Amanda — but I have to do this."

A flicker of irritation crossed Waller's features and suddenly she had a gun in her hands and was pointing it at Lyla. "Treason, once again, Agent Michaels. This is rapidly becoming a habit of yours."
"What is wrong with you?" Felicity shouted. "We're all on the same side!"

Waller ignored her, the gun trained on Lyla's head. Twelve feet of distance between them, a widening chasm in their shared beliefs — the difference between the willingness to do what was necessary, and sacrificing innocent lives for a cause of pride — not of honor.

"No," said Lyla, her eyes steadily on Amanda's. "I think we both know what side we stand on. Felicity, start the evac. Now."

Waller released the safety with a click. "I wouldn't."

Suddenly, Lyla wasn't there anymore. The gun discharged with a deafening crack, and Felicity threw up her arms to shield herself from the glass that exploded from a shattered screen. Lyla lunged from under the table and crashed heavily into Waller. They hit the floor with a thud and the gun went off again, the bullet ricocheting off the steel walls — sparking as it hit one of the computers.

"Felicity!" Lyla slammed Waller's wrist into the floor, sending the handgun skittering out of sight. "Now!"

Felicity skidded her way through the broken glass and started to type. She winced when the alarms shrieked outside the doors, but didn't stop. Routing power to the underground railroad — done. Making sure the trains were running — done. Evacuation points all over the facility would be opening...now.

The elevator doors whooshed open behind them, and Felicity finally looked up. Waller, breathing hard from the struggle, had just retrieved her handgun, but it was already too late.

"Old habits," said Lyla, sounding out of breath. She had a gun as well, pointed at Waller. Her lip was bleeding as she backed towards the computers.

"Extreme measures, Agent Michaels," said Waller, her gun pointed at Lyla's forehead. Felicity didn't want to doubt her aim. "I believe you understand that about me."

"We both know you aren't going to shoot me, Amanda," she said, steadily. "The general in you still thinks I'm an irreplaceable asset."

"The general in me does not tolerate insubordination and treason."

"Brave and the bold," Lyla said, with a ghost of a smile. "Whatever the personal cost."

Then she slammed her fist into the controls and began to speak.

"All agents, this is Harbinger. Phantom protocol has been issued. All remaining agents are to proceed with evacuation. Repeat — Phantom protocol has been issued. T-minus ten minutes to final evacuation."

Waller's gun didn't move. "Sorry, Amanda," said Lyla. "But it's too late now."

Felicity thought the tension was going to go off like a grenade and obliterate them all. But then Waller did something that Felicity had stopped expecting her to do — the rational thing. She put the pin back in.

She lowered her gun with a disgusted curl to her lip. "Clearly," she said. "But I will not forget this,
Agent Michaels. And make no mistake, what happens now – it's all on you."

"For the record," said Felicity, sending another elevator down to the railroad. "I hated her before she siced a drone on Nanda Parbat."

Lyla smiled wanly, not taking her eyes off the screens. "Well, I think I'm going to be out of a job soon, so I sympathize."

"I heard of a job opening somewhere. More of a night job, really – very little sunlight if you're looking to lose that healthy glow, pretty high-risk high-reward crime-fighting, no health and dental. But you get to work alongside your friends and your husband."

Lyla laughed softly. "If I get to see my daughter again after all this, I think I'll go on sabbatical."

Felicity started to laugh too, but she almost lost her hearing in the sudden pop of static and gunfire. "Felicity!"

"Oliver?" Felicity's skin prickled at the anxiety in his voice. "What's wrong?"

"What happened?" she asked, helping as Diggle and Oliver lowered Roy gently to the ground. Roy was out cold, unresponsive even when Felicity accidentally-on-purpose let his head smack the floor.

"He knocked me out of the way," said Diggle, out of breath. "Got hit by the gas, but he's breathing."

Felicity still touched his pulse to make sure. His head jerked in some kind of response to the dream, but he didn't wake. It was like the Mirakuru all over again, except they didn't have a cure.

Part of her wanted to make an ill-timed joke about Sleeping Beauty and Roy needing a kiss from Thea, but she really didn't want to make Oliver suicidal. He was probably in his classic Oliver Queen guilt spiral, double the usual because Roy was his mentee.

"When we get out, I'll take a blood sample – sic Star Labs on it." Felicity glanced at Oliver cautiously. "You okay?"

He looked up at her and for a second, he didn't say anything. Of course he wouldn't be okay, but she had to ask anyway, to remind him that he could be. But that, as usual, was a topic for later discussion.

"I didn't see Nyssa," he said. "I think she and Ra's are planning something."

Diggle scrubbed a hand tiredly across his sweaty face. "We just don't know what."

"Hence –" Felicity said, "the strategic retreat before they get to pull another fast one. By the way, Dig, your wife pointed a gun at Waller and she's probably going to get fired. But in her defence – Waller started it."

Diggle looked confused (not that she could blame him), but when Lyla came towards them he swept her up in a tight hug, and only broke apart because of the alarm Felicity had set on the computer – the one that told her evacuation was past ninety percent finished.

"There's one last group of agents coming through," said Felicity, peering at the surveillance. "They're headed our way, and because it's apparently a given, the League's hot on their trail." She looked up at everybody. "Last evac. Then we're all getting out of here."
Lyla already had a gun in her hands. "We'll cover them."

Felicity nodded and got back on her computer. "And I'll try to slow the League down."

Diggle squeezed Felicity's shoulder and went through the doors first with Lyla, a couple of agents at their heels. Oliver slung his bow across his back, and reached uncharacteristically for a handgun instead – one of the many lying on the table surface.

"Ran out of arrows," he said, checking the ammunition with surprising familiarity.

Felicity felt like her mother had just walked in wearing clothes that – for once – didn't scream strobe lights and tequila. Oliver – gun – bullets – what?

"You never said you knew how to use a gun," she said, unable to keep the shock out of her voice.

Oliver met her eyes in his usual practical way. "Never said I didn't know how."

"You know, as a concerned girlfriend, the news that you've caught up with the 21st Century and – you know – bullets, should be music to my ears. But I think I still like the bow. The gun's a little too Bratva-Captain for my taste."

Oliver cracked a smile, and she checked another item off her déjà vu list – making Oliver smile before he went out to fight. They stared at each other then, separated by a computer and broken glass, two people in the middle of a war who still didn't know everything about each other. Too much – too soon. As if Oliver could sense that her humor was about to give way to darker thoughts, he leaned across the computers and pulled her towards him. He kissed her quickly, his breath fanning hot across her cheek. Quickly, but always soft, like they were alone and not surrounded by a room of injured ARGUS agents and a full-scale evacuation going on outside.

"Later," he said, against her mouth. Always later.

Felicity let him slip through her open hands as he jumped down from the dais and started towards the doors.

"Later," she said, shaking her head long after he had disappeared. "Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow."
Felicity couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it earlier. All the ARGUS systems at her fingertips, and it hadn't occurred to her that she could have been pulling the fire alarm.

Of course, the regular fire alarm with a few sprinklers wouldn't be likely to cause a dent. But ARGUS-level fire extinguishing systems, with carbon dioxide-based, high-compression gas outputs — they were doing a pretty decent job at slowing down the League. CO2 fire extinguishers had a nasty habit of displacing oxygen, and even super-assassins needed oxygen to function.

"Impressive," said Waller, as Felicity pulled another fire alarm in the League's path and cut the power to boot. "We should have had you here in the beginning."

"There's no we, Amanda." Felicity kept typing, her eyes never leaving the screen. "Any chance of a we died when you ordered that drone strike on hundreds of innocent people."

"I did what I had to, Miss Smoak, and you will too. Right now."

Felicity stared at Waller apprehensively. "Now?"

Waller leaned closer, her voice low. "There was a protocol called the Apocalypse. It was built into every ARGUS installation, a system of explosive charges that would detonate and collapse the structure in on itself. Obviously, the risks were huge — what if executive control was usurped — what if the wrong person was given the trigger? Because of certain...pressures, the protocol was deactivated, but as you can tell, this bunker is relatively new and its design was supervised by someone who weighed the risks alongside the necessary measures to be taken for collective security."

"Sounds like a sociopath," Felicity muttered.

Her eyes glinted. "Once that elevator goes down, Miss Smoak, I need you to activate the Apocalypse protocol."

"You," said Felicity. "Really need to stop putting your faith in things that go boom."

Waller tilted her head, unimpressed by Felicity's reaction. "The only people who would die are in the League of Assassins."

"And the ARGUS agents knocked unconscious by the gas," Felicity reminded her, in a voice hard enough to rival Waller's. "Assuming that mass-murdering your own people isn't a terrible idea — which it always is — what happened to your amazing plan to draw out Ra's al Ghul? You think dropping a building on his army is going to make him any less angry? He'll regroup — there's more where that came from and he'll try again — except this time he won't fall for it, and you'll still be missing a head by the time he's done with you."

"Of course, killing Ra's is the primary objective. But the bulk of his forces are within this building and I could save lives if I made sure they never saw the light again." Waller rapped her knuckles smartly on the table. "Either way, with your assistance or without — as soon as the elevators go down, I'll pull the trigger."
"Then why did you tell me this?" Felicity asked, warily.

"Because I still think you know in your heart of hearts what needs to be done. There's steel in you, Miss Smoak, not just fire. If you ever want to be more than tech support for your little group of boys — you need to make the hard decisions, the tough calls. Starting with this one. Stop me, don't stop me — either way, you'll have made a choice. Just the small difference between the easy way out and the hard way forward."

"Felicity — ETA two minutes!"

Felicity turned towards the computers again, her hands flying across the controls. Too fast to think, too quick to process.

"Choose, Miss Smoak," said Waller, softly in her ear. "Choose."

It was almost time. The elevator was filling up with agents, crucial equipment — and bodies. Felicity glanced up as Roy was lifted past her and moved into the elevator. The doors were — uneasily — wide open, to facilitate the stream of agents still coming in from battles all across the floor. Bleeding or worse, but alive. Felicity was manning the computers, with agents grouped around the dais below — guns pointed towards the open doors, ready to fire at any sign of hostiles.

Waller was still by the computers, and Felicity didn't trust her there, but she didn't expect anyone to believe her if she said that their boss was planning to blow them up. The only people who trusted her implicitly and without qualms were all outside — fighting for their lives and the lives of strangers.

"I see you," she said, as her friends appeared on the screens. They had the injured between them, the ones who'd fallen behind.

"Felicity, we need more time!"

She was already working. "Got it."

Fire alarms, gas valves, power outages — she was doing all she could to give them those precious few seconds that could mean the difference between life and death.

Felicity thought her heart was going to burst when she saw them again. Oliver and Diggle first, supporting a hobbling agent between them, Lyla bringing up the rear. An agent went down beside her, a knife lodged in his throat. Her gun ran out of bullets — she grabbed another from the back of her belt and kept firing.

"Get inside!" Felicity yelled, both to her friends and the agents around the dais. Lyla slipped through, and Felicity keyed in the command.

The doors started to close — except they didn't.

A deafening crunch stopped them dead — fixed at a shoulders-breadth apart. The body of the dead agent — knife in his larynx — had been thrown between the doors, a black assassin's boot on his crushed chest. For the longest second — Felicity was frozen, caught between a dawning sense of horror that her friends were still in danger, and the idea that any second, Waller could activate her insane Apocalypse protocol.

Then she got hit by an arrow.
The shock hit her before the pain did. Other people shut down, but her mind was in overdrive. Felicity knew they were out of time. Any second, and they could all be engulfed in the same gas that knocked Roy out and left hundreds of ARGUS agents still in the building. It wouldn't just be her that died, but her friends as well, left to the mercy of the League.

Oliver would be in Ra's al Ghul's hands, and he would die.

Her body flooded with adrenaline that dulled the pain as she crawled back onto her feet, through fragmented glass and broken arrows, towards the computers. To do what she had to – alone.

Except she wasn't.

A single gun returned fire. Waller stood above her, looking as darkly triumphant as a Queen in battle, unyielding, even in their hour of defeat. Her bullets found their mark, but the arrows kept coming. There were too many of them.

"No time, Miss Smoak," she said, and she was daring Felicity to make the choice.

Sparks rained down from shattering screens as Felicity turned back. She could see Oliver — fighting to reach her, fighting someone's hold on him — and Diggle, thank God for Diggle — forcing him back. The both of them shouting for her to come with them.

How many times had she asked him not to go?

How many times had he listened?

In that instant, the shrieking alarm drowned out everything else, making it impossible to hear what he was saying — but his mouth formed her name and she knew he was shouting it. Her vision became laser-sharp — seeing everything she knew about Oliver Queen in painful clarity — as if she knew it was the last time. Fragmented images, like a disjointed film reel — the scars on his body, as thrilling as a shared secret — the way he smiled as if it was just for her — the whisper of his words against her lips when he murmured to her between kisses — the first giddy rush when he stopped her words with a kiss, back in that hospital corridor, his hands gently holding her face like he couldn't bear to let her go. The very first time she'd turned in her chair, in that bright little room from another life, and saw Oliver Queen standing in front of her. He'd shown her a life that wasn't mundane and — before she'd even realized it — what it meant to love slowly, unknowingly, fearlessly...completely.

A strange feeling of calm descended on her, forging her fears to iron, her doubts to steel. Because Felicity was not going to let Ra's al Ghul take Oliver away from her – from the team – from Starling City. Not again.

Waller was right — Felicity could make the hard choice. But not about sacrificing other people's lives, because it wasn't her call to make. The only life she could control was her own, and she hoped to God it would mean something.

A split-second decision, a tough call.

She chose the hard way. An ugly sacrifice for a beautiful truth. Her tomorrows for his.

"I'm sorry!" she shouted, as though he could hear her, and lunged for the computer. She slammed onto the controls and sent the elevator hurtling down — to the last way out.

With the evacuation sequence complete, the alarms fell silent, and an eerie quiet descended. It rang slowly and unnaturally in her ears, as if it was all a dream. But it wasn't. Felicity knew the League was seconds away from getting through the doors, so she pulled herself to her feet and began to type
frantically, ignoring the pain in her arm, the arid tightness in her throat. She had to make sure that the data was gone from the computers and the system was wiped clean — of everything.

"No Apocalypse," she said, as the black-robed figures streamed into the room, surrounding the dais they stood on.

Waller let her arm fall to her side, and the gun clattered onto the floor. "Very good, Miss Smoak," she answered, sardonically. "We may yet survive this."

Felicity swallowed, because she very much doubted it. Slowly, she drew herself up to her full height, bloodied and bruised but ready to face it all.

Chapter End Notes

Hellooooo. So this is probably going to be the last chapter of 2014. I realized after I wrote it that this was a cliffhanger-ish way to end things, sorry about that. Also - Waller is insane, even in my head. Seriously. The amount of things she says that makes me want to punch her. So sorry for inflicting her on you. When Felicity sees all those "flashes" of Oliver, I tried to parallel 3x09 when Oliver sees Felicity before he dies (in some weird misguided attempt to make people feel better about the winter finale, I guess. Bleh.)

Anyway. I am going to be both writing and studying for my mock exams which are coming up kinda soon hahahahaha (I really need a break). But Happy 2015 in advance and you guys stay awesome. It's going to be a good year.
The overhead lights flickered as the train took a rough turn on the rails, darkness flashing past the train windows as they sped towards a destination unknown. Uncertainty was mirrored on everyone's faces, and everyone was too tired to stand. The remnants of an exhausted ARGUS army either slumped against the walls or huddled in the middle of the train floor — waiting, just waiting.

Except Oliver.

Oliver slammed his fist into the steel wall and felt it rattle beneath his bones, transferring a sickening jolt that shot up his arm and into his brain like lightning.

"Oliver."

He ignored Diggle, ignored the part of him that knew Diggle had been right to hold him back. But he couldn't look at his friend because he was irrationally, blindingly, all-consumingly angry. Because they'd left her behind.

They'd left Felicity behind.

Oliver punched the wall again. He knew the agents at the other end of the train compartment were eyeing him warily, and he knew that he wasn't doing Lyla any favors by losing his temper, but all he wanted to do was stop thinking — stop rationalizing — and lash out until he couldn't feel anything anymore.

"Oliver." Diggle appeared in his peripheral vision. "Stop."

"Don't — John —" Oliver fought to control the bitter taste of words he was going to regret. "Not now — not after what just happened."

"I know, man, and I'm sorry. But she's right — you know she's right."

Oliver rounded on Diggle and for a second he wasn't sure if he would have fought his friend, then and there, with his wife and dozens of strangers watching at a distance. But Diggle just looked at him, and suddenly Oliver couldn't bear it. He turned away, planting his hands unsteadily on the wall.

When Diggle spoke next, his voice had softened, but the truth in it stayed just as hard to hear. "All of us knew what we were getting into when we went looking for you — we all knew that getting you back wouldn't be for free. There was always going to be a sacrifice." Diggle touched his shoulder, and Oliver let him. "I'm not gonna say that Felicity's sacrifice was the wrong one to make — but I will say that I wish to God it hadn't been her. Out of all of us, I don't think anyone wanted Felicity to make that call."

Diggle, as usual, was right. The voice of reason, even at a time of loss.

The adrenaline was already starting to ebb away, and exhaustion crept up in its place. Oliver let his head hang. "We left her behind, John," he said, staring at the floor. "And he'll kill her — he'll kill her when he finds out what she means to me."

Oliver's hands curled into fists again — because they didn't understand, or they did, all too well — and punched the wall so hard that his knuckles split.
Felicity was really starting to get tired of the color black. Black was the color of the lightless cell block they’d been shoved into, black was the color of the walls at her back and the air she breathed, the nothingness she pushed her hands into, the color of the italic whispers she heard in her ears.

"They've really shaken things up with the deco," she said, more to herself than her cellmate. "Black's a bold choice to go with. If they weren't about to kill us — I'd respect that."

"They're not about to kill us," said Waller dismissively, her heels tapping discordantly on the ground. She hadn't sat down, not since they'd been dumped in the pitch-black cell. "They're going to secure their fortress before they start the executions."

"Oh," said Felicity. "My mistake. Thanks."

Felicity stretched a crick in her shoulder and immediately regretted it as the movement jarred the fresh cut in her arm. Another accident she was going to need stitches for — assuming she survived long enough for any doctor to look at her. She suspected the League had taken a leaf out of Cheshire's book (or written the leaf in Cheshire's book) and laced their weapons with something funky. The effects didn't feel lethal, given the swelling/itching/general discomfort, but she didn't exactly want to find out if it was the former.

"Well," she said, stretching out her stiff legs. "It's a good thing I shut off the power and all that fun stuff. The cell locks are electronic, right?"

"If by electronic you mean 'is there no deadbolt' in which case — yes, the cell locks are electronic, but there is a deadbolt," Waller replied acidly. "Which — unless you have a powerful electromagnet inside your shoe — is impossible to maneuver."

"I wonder who else is down here," Felicity said, as the sound of footsteps passed by their cell, accompanied by a dragging sound that meant prisoners. "Did you leave the Suicide Squad in their cells?"

"Prisoners of value to ARGUS were evacuated along with the agents. I'm surprised you didn't come across that fact in your meddling."

Felicity sat up. "What about the prisoners of no value?" she asked. "Who did you leave behind?"

Something shifted in the darkness. "Me."

Felicity yelped and slammed into the corner. She'd taken it for granted that there was no one else in the pitch-dark, but apparently there was.

And he'd been very quiet.

"Oh, lovely," said Waller, sarcastically. "I'd forgotten that you were on the low-priority list."

"Low — Low-priority?" Felicity was practically yelling. "There is a strange man in the corner of the cell and we had no idea he existed because he is crazy good at being invisible — if he's low-priority, what kind of scary people do you have on your VIP list?"

"Low-priority prisoners," said the faint voice, now tinged with amusement, "include defected ARGUS agents with intelligence deemed low-value by the higher-ups — or individuals who have offended the wrong people and thus attained the rank of eyesore. Isn't that what you called me, Amanda? Three — four — years ago? After you didn't get what you wanted?"

"What is he talking about?" Felicity looked in the direction where she estimated Waller to be. "What
Felicity wondered if the arrow had been laced with mushrooms, because this sounded like the kind of insane conversation she'd imagine while tripping. Or bouncing. Or bopping — whatever the term for being on drugs was these days.

"Sorry — Mr. Yamashiro — you killed your wife the second time. Um —" said Felicity, wondering if there was any way to make it sound less stupid, "don't people usually die once?"

Waller sighed heavily, as if she was very bored.

"My wife did die, but I found a way to bring her back. To cheat death, as it's said."

Felicity sat up straighter, the back of her neck prickling with recognition.

*You may not know this, but my father has led an extraordinarily long life.*

"Could you tell me how?"

"I found a pit," said Yamashiro. "And I used it to bring her back to life."

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*Lazarus? The guy who rose from the dead?*

"Pseudo-science and altitude sickness and sleep deprivation," said Waller dismissively. "Your wife Tatsu didn't last very long in her second life, now did she? Convenient that she died before you could bring her in to us, before we could run tests and discover exactly what made your wife come back to the land of the living."

"So you threw him in a cell because he didn't tell you the secret? Not," Felicity added, quickly, "that I am condoning in any way the murder of your wife, which I still hope you weren't serious about."

"The pit brought her back," said Yamashiro, as if neither of them had spoken, "but it changed her. She became deranged, tried to kill me — our son — I had to stop her. I had to undo the wrong I did by reversing her death. The natural order had to be restored, so I killed her to preserve our son's memory of her — kind, beautiful, loving — not the monster I saw her become after she woke."

"Monster?" Felicity was finding it hard to tell whether Nyssa and Yamashiro were talking about the same thing. Nyssa talked about the Lazarus pits like they were a curious delight, the chink in her father's armor, but Yamashiro made it sound worse than battery acid and shock therapy, judging by his description of his resurrected wife. "Like how — monster? Like homicidal mass-murdering monster? Like crazy-strong, crazy-undefeatable monster? Or like insanely-strong-until-they-fall-on-your-sword kind of monster?"

"Miss Smoak," said Waller, sharply. "What do you know? Are there others like Tatsu?"

Yamashiro's corner rustled, like he was moving closer to hear her. Felicity swallowed.

"About that…" she said. "When we were in Nanda Parbat…we may have heard things. About the
League. About Ra's al Ghul."

"What kind of things?"

"The kind of things that make me wonder if he's really as immortal as everyone says he is," said Felicity. "Or whether he's pretty strong until someone pokes him with a sword."

Felicity didn't remember falling asleep, but she woke to feel a warm hand on her face. At first, she leaned into it, imagining that it was Oliver's — but when her memory kicked in she realized exactly where she wasn't, and recoiled violently.

"Don't do that!" she hissed, her back aching from when she'd slammed into the wall.

"You were saying a name in your sleep," said Yamashiro in a matter-of-fact kind of way, shuffling slowly back to his corner of the cell. "I thought I'd wake you if it was a nightmare. It's what I used to do with my boy."

Felicity flushed. "It wasn't," she said, propping her head up on her good arm. Quieter still, as she thought of Oliver — safe and away from her. "He wouldn't."

Yamashiro's clothes rustled, as if he was adjusting his position. "Important to you."

It wasn't a question, and Felicity said nothing.

"I had a friend by that name once," said Yamashiro, and fell silent.

"Important," said Waller laconically, from the far end of the cell, "appears to be an understatement."

Felicity really thought it was time for everyone to be in different cells, with the amount of eavesdropping and unwanted interjections going around. But she felt like the proverbial end of the road was coming, and even with her limited experience with death — it didn't feel right to be alone, near the end.

"Do you need to talk?" Felicity asked, feeling like a priest at the final confession. In anonymous darkness, maybe Waller would want to open up — and Felicity would finally see the heart beneath the impenetrable armor.

Waller laughed, a short sound of dark mirth. "This is the part where I disclose my fear of death, is it not? Where I admit my guilt and bare my soul for absolution?"

"Sorry for thinking you have one," Felicity muttered.

"Oh, I did. But I killed it with my bare hands — every time I made an unconscionable decision as the Head of ARGUS. It's hard to fear death when you have no soul to be concerned about," she said, matter-of-factly.

Then Waller, like Yamashiro, said nothing more, and Felicity stared into the murky darkness with her eyes wide open, her mind buzzing with unanswered questions, and above all — the searing conviction that she wasn't ready to die.
Brave

They'd come for them — Waller and Felicity.

"Goodbye, then, Amanda," said Yamashiro, dryly. "I'd say 'until we meet again', but…" He let the sentence hang.

"Clever," Waller answered. "I'll let Mr. Queen know that you're doing well, shall I?"

"Oliver?" Felicity said. "Mr. Yamashiro – you know Oliver? Oliver Queen, Oliver? Shipwreck-survivor-ex-billionaire Oliver?"

"I don't know about ex-billionaire," said Yamashiro. "When I met him, he was just a boy who didn't know how to do his own laundry."

The doors slammed open in a burst of blinding light, and Felicity was hauled to her feet.

"Mr. Yamashiro!" she said, but he was a pale flicker at the corner of the cell, shrinking away from the light.

"How does he know Oliver?" Felicity demanded, as her eyes watered from the sudden brightness.

Waller turned her head unconcernedly, more interested in the cells they were going past than the question. "Mr. Yamashiro had a substantial role in turning Oliver Queen into the man you know today. Including the more unsavory aspects of his personal history you seem intent on sugarcoating. Ah," she said, with a small smile in Felicity's direction. "But he probably never told you that, did he?"

Felicity stumbled to keep up with the swift stride of their guards, wondering where they were going. Without power, the ARGUS building was a murky, underground prison. Maybe less death-trap tunnels and sand arenas, but still as unwelcoming. Just when she thought the resemblance to Nanda Parbat couldn't be any more marked, they'd installed burning braziers at every corner in lieu of electricity.

Very nice decor.

There were really only a few places large enough to gather a crowd of prisoners and still have room to kill them, and the lucky distinction of an impromptu hangman's square fell to a vast sub-basement. Felicity recognized it from the tour, remembered the jeep she'd seen rumbling across the space. The same jeep was overturned on its side and strewn with bodies she didn't want to look at. The giant elevators were inert and inoperable, the lights gone dark, and shadows blurred the sharp, precise lines of the military bunker. Flickering fires made everything seem — unreal. Brutal. Arcane. Like they'd stepped into some bizarre ritual.

Felicity was reminded of just how much Waller symbolized in terms of the war when all eyes went to her as she was marched down the stairs, her hands bound in front of her where all could see. Most people would have looked disheveled from a night in a windowless cell, but Waller had not one hair out of place. Even captured, the haughty lilt to her chin and the curl to her dark lips still made her well-defined features look like a Queen's.

And for an instant, Felicity thought that Waller would be able to do it — that of all people, she would be able to escape it.
Death at Ra's al Ghul's hand.

There were still bodies of unconscious ARGUS agents strewn around the base, which Felicity had to stumble around and over. She supposed that there was a symbolic purpose, surrounding Waller with the bodies, a reminder that she'd lost — and badly.

But Waller waited. Felicity saw her eyes travel slowly across the bodies, opaque. As if the bodies couldn't hurt her. As if all this had figured into her calculations.

A sudden hush descended over all the murmurs, and Felicity looked behind.

Then she immediately ducked her head.

Nyssa.

In all the chaos and Lazarus pit speculation and Ra's-al-Ghul-assassination plotting, Felicity had forgotten about the one person who A) knew her exact affiliation with Oliver and B) was probably not on her side (since, for all intents and purposes, it looked like Felicity had helped with the drone strike that basically blew up her home in a truly regrettable fashion).

As Felicity fixed her eyes on the floor, wishing she could sink right through it, she heard Nyssa make her way slowly across, surveying the prisoners corralled in the center of the room.

Her voice rippled in the unfamiliar words of Arabic as she spoke to one of the lieutenants, but Felicity heard a name clear enough — Ra's al Ghul, and something that sounded like Queen.

Felicity looked — because she had to — as Nyssa's inscrutable black eyes travelled further along the line, as though drawn to Waller's magnetic self-assured presence. But when Nyssa's gaze stopped abruptly — just short of Waller — Felicity bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to taste blood, because she knew that she'd been recognized.

Nyssa's expression seemed to freeze, and for an instant, Felicity was so sure that neither of them knew where each other's allegiances lay.

Something changed in the room, an alchemic shift, an inhuman shiver that ran the length of the room and back. One by one, the assassins knelt as Ra's al Ghul passed them, his black armor gleaming savagely under the flickering light.

"Who leads you?" asked Ra's.

Waller exhaled dismissively, as if she was resigning herself to an unpleasant job, and stepped forward.

"I do," she said, her shoulders straight and dignified, standing at her full impressive height. "Ra's al Ghul, I believe? A pleasure to finally meet you — though I would have preferred it had you knocked."

Felicity thought she'd had the issue with death wishes.

Takes one to know one.

Because apparently, so did Waller.

Ra's al Ghul's face twisted with dark amusement, as if he was acknowledging that someone like
Waller could impress him.

"Kneel before the Demon's Head," said Nyssa, imperiously.

The corner of Waller's mouth curved upward, wicked as a scythe.

"No."

Felicity thought the air was going to cut — she really did — because the atmosphere bristled with two enormous egos, two formidable and downright dangerous presences — a Demon King and a ruthless Warrior queen.

"You are a brave woman," said Ra's, with a small tilt to his head, deceptively gracious. "But you are a fool for challenging powers you could not hope to understand."

"I simply saw a tyranny that needed to be replaced," said Waller, with a flicker of dark amusement. "As for greater powers, I only ever answered to justice, and my country. Not a madman with illusions of a kingdom."

"Brave words, Amanda Waller, but death comes for us all." Ra's slowly drew his sword, a graceful crescent of black steel. "Now kneel, and meet Him with dignity."

Instead of doing as she was told, Waller took a step forward, then another, towards the mound of ARGUS bodies. No one else moved — because where could she go? Her hands were bound in front of her, and the room was enclosed wall-to-wall by hostile assassins.

Slowly – almost carefully – Waller sank to her knees before the bodies, her shoulders straight and perfectly still.

Nyssa glanced at her father and bowed her head, as if in acknowledgement of his order.

"In the name of Ra's al Ghul," she said, in a low, hypnotic voice, "I pass upon you the sentence of death for crimes against the League. Through your unprovoked attack on our ancestral homes, you have cost the lives of many honorable vassals and destroyed the lives of countless innocents. Do you have any last pleas to make in your defense?"

Waller inhaled, and Felicity saw the graceful shape of her skull as she tilted her head back to look at the ceiling.

"I am not a malleable individual," she said, in a voice that carried — hypnotic as Nyssa's but in its own proud way. "Not a loving mother and a demure follower of men. I have been scorned for daring to make the hard choices, for daring not to be the Queen on the chessboard — but the hand that moves the pieces. Sometimes I think that in another life, I would have been a witch they burned at the stake for being ahead of the times. Sometimes I think that in another life I would have worn a crown. But in this life, I lived in the darkness and did battle in the shadows — all so the blissfully ignorant could close their eyes at night. If that is why I am sentenced to die by an authority I unequivocally do not recognize — then so be it. I have no regrets, because you may think that ARGUS dies with me — but it certainly will not. By killing me you incur the wrath of a very different kind of darkness, a kind of darkness I have cultivated especially to obey my own rules. Miracles you couldn't possibly fathom, individuals worse than the ghosts you fear, weapons that could reduce your little underground city to a scorched crater in a hillside. So kill me — I beg of you, because you will all burn with me."

Every ARGUS agent watched her, and so did the League. For a moment, Felicity swore that Waller held the respect of every single person in the room.
"Unrepentant to the end," said Nyssa, stepping away from Waller, as if she was clearing the path for her father.

The surface of Ra's' sword rippled as he raised it over his head like Death's scythe. As he prepared to take the final blow.

Felicity heard the sound first. The slick of a blade sliding through rope, and the telltale click of safety catch.

No.

It seemed like a dream — a bizarre What-If scenario on a bad TV show — when Waller spun around in a blur and in her hands was a small black gun, a gun she pointed at Ra's al Ghul's head.

Her features gleamed with wicked triumph.

"You really shouldn't leave weapons on dead bodies," she said, and squeezed the trigger.
Felicity's ears were still ringing from the gunshot when a jet of blood streaked the ground. Spinning too fast to see, the gun came to rest at Nyssa's feet, while Waller's arm dropped limply to her side, her sleeve ripped open to the bone. A rivulet of blood dripped from her fingertip and pooled on the ground beside her knee.

Ra's al Ghul inclined his head, completely unharmed.

There was a dead assassin by his feet, one unfortunate enough to be standing behind him when he dodged the gunshot. A pool of blood seeped steadily from beneath a ragged hood, as unreal as a staged murder.

"Valiant effort," said Ra's evenly. "A snake's methods, but admirable in its own, deceptive way."

Waller lifted her head, as if she couldn't see the pale gleam of bone between the weeping gash. Cool and calm, even as Ra's al Ghul leveled his sword to her throat, and she was well and truly out of cards to play.

Felicity fell still, every muscle in her body caught in the paralysis of watching someone about to die. Waller's eyes found Felicity's, black and wide and defiant. Bleeding, on the edge of death, she still drew herself up to her full height and lifted her chin high. She bared her teeth in a defiant smile.

"Your turn," said Amanda, and Felicity knew that she wasn't talking to Ra's.

But Felicity still screamed when the blade cut into Waller's throat, the sickening cleaving of bone and tissue. And the blood.

Waller's eyes were still wide and triumphant, her teeth still twisted in a ghoulish smile, even as her head rolled to a stop, just below the point of Ra's' dripping sword. Blood pooled at her severed neck, a sickening reminder of a debt claimed.

Felicity felt her whole body shake, a shudder of revulsion — as the agents around her realized that they were going to die — as Ra's' black eyes swept across the room.

"What of Queen?" he asked, Waller's blood dripping silently from his blade.

"He escaped," said Nyssa, without a glance in Felicity's direction. "We have him on the run."

"No matter. Sooner or later, he will come — when the bodies lie at his door."

"What of them?" Nyssa said, tilting her head as if she didn't much care.

Ra's flicked the blood from his sword, and Felicity flinched as the droplets flecked her cheeks in a streak of ghastly heat. "The League takes no prisoners," he said, and turned away. "See it done."

Diggle stood in the doorway of an abandoned train, a gun in his hand. The air was high and cold and dark, the only lights coming from the dusty train windows — a stark fluorescent lamp sitting on a worktable. As much as he trusted Oliver's flare for the dramatic and his choice of venues, the nearly pitch-black tunnel always gave him the shivers.

He waited to see if he'd imagined the movement after all.
"It's only me," said Lyla, pulling back her hood. Her face showed the strains of the last twenty-four hours, and for a moment they leaned into each other, just listening to the other breathe.

"What did you find?" he asked, as they both chose creaking leather seats opposite each other.

Lyla propped her legs up and stared at the ceiling, a tic of hers when she was trying to remember.

"Most of our agents have dispersed according to protocol, the others are just getting patched up. They know their orders — they know we all need time to regroup."

"I went by the ARGUS base, and so far it's dark. The SCPD have no idea, but the FBI and CIA might — the other station chiefs might have alerted them, I don't know. The military doesn't want to draw attention to the fact that a terrorist organization's taken over a base in the center of Starling, and right now I think they're just waiting for demands."

"Hostages?"

Lyla sighed, scrubbing a hand across her weary face. "We all know the League's not really in the habit of taking prisoners. So it's more like waiting for the bodies to drop."

Diggle shut his eyes and rested his forehead on his hands. "This is hell."

"I'm sorry, Johnny. She was my friend too."

"Is," he corrected, without looking up. "Until we see a body — no past tense. Felicity's still alive. We have to hope she is."

"You can hope." The chair creaked as Lyla leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I have to think about our next move. How long is Oliver going to need?"

"To get over losing the love of his life?" Diggle said, tonelessly. "How long would you need?"

"I still have you," Lyla said, with a small humorless smile. "Don't I?"

Diggle shook his head. "I don't know. When it comes to Felicity — Oliver can be very predictable — and very reckless. But I really don't know if he'll be the same — if it happens."

"Oliver's never handled death like the rest of us. We grieve — he gets angry. I just need to know whether the anger will help us against the League of Assassins, or if I'm going to need a bigger gun."

"That depends," said Diggle, lifting his head to stare at the door. "On whether he loses her."

Felicity's knees cracked against the steel floors. She tasted blood in her mouth, from when she'd bitten the inside of her cheek to stop herself from making another sound. Seeing a decapitation had an unfortunate side-effect of hyperventilation, and her ribs were already starting to sting from the painkillers wearing off.

One good part about dying — no more pain. Because it felt like every part of her was hurting.

They were all waiting, waiting for the axe to drop. Felicity looked back. They were being herded into ordered rows, like animals being grouped for the slaughter. Every drawn blade made her shiver, so she turned away.

The guy beside her was whispering to himself, stumbling over words she couldn't make out, his teeth rattling like it was sub-zero temperature. The agent on her other side was crying silently, tears tracing
their way down his cheeks.

Felicity faced the front again, her heart racing. Her gaze was continuously drawn to the pool of blood — Waller's blood. She could see her own reflection, a pale wraith of herself, young(ish) and insignificant enough to die — just like that.

No speeches, no preamble. The only times she remembered losing her words was when she was with Oliver — and she'd let them go.

The thought of him sent a pang of longing into her heart.

Felicity heard footsteps behind her, from the executioners taking their places, and her mind went frantically blank. She had no prayers to murmur, no pleas to whisper — nothing except the threads of unfinished stories in her short life, and knowing that it was never going to be enough.

"Our father who art in Heaven," said the agent beside her, his voice growing steadily louder from panic. "Hallowed be thy name."

It felt like hurtling towards a yawning edge, like lying on the cold iron tracks as they rattled from an approaching train, like that breathless second before the plunge. Felicity felt her throat tighten, her breaths shrink, as if there was never going to be enough air for her — as if she was never going to have enough of it all — of life.

"—on earth, as it is in Heaven."

There was a new scent in the room already salted with rust and blood. The spiced smell of dry mountain wind.

"—lead us not into temptation,"

A hand touched her between the shoulders, and Felicity flinched. But it gently trailed up her collar and braced the nape of her neck, a thumb sliding into her matted hair.

Oh great. She'd gotten a handsy executioner.

"—but deliver us from evil."

Felicity sucked in her breath — for the last time.

"Stay down," Nyssa hissed.

"What?" Felicity started to turn, but Nyssa's grip on her neck tightened sharply. She gasped as her throat seized up and the pain built into bone-breaking agony. But her throat seized up before she could scream, her lungs burning inside her chest. A burst of light went off somewhere in Felicity's brain and the last thing she remembered was falling forward, the jagged edges in her vision fading softly to black.
Oliver closed his eyes as dust swirled around his body. He'd left Diggle and Lyla and Roy back in the secondary base, returning to the Foundry on the pretense of retrieving something he'd forgotten. In a few hours he would deal with the grieving, the rage, the strategizing — but for now, away from everyone, he just wanted to be alone.

His grip on his bow. The lone pool of fluorescent light, trained on the far wall. The targets for his arrows. His senses focused to a single, sharp point — slowing his pulse, filtering out the distractions. It was a method developed from a history of loss and a talent for outrunning it. There was nothing pride-worthy in that knowledge, but it was the truth.

His father.

Yao Fei.

Shado.

Tommy.

His mother.

Sara.

And many more after, too many to say, enough to remember. Etched in his mind, the names of the dead. The people he had to honor by living. The people he looked forward to seeing — at the end of everything.

But not her — dear God, not her.

Oliver would have burned down the world beyond if it meant that she would never pass into the darkness, if it meant that she would exist still in the world above.

"Felicity."

Oliver let himself say it, as if would exorcise her ghost. But the pain clawed at his insides, razored the edges of his vision to pain-filled crimson, and Oliver couldn't take it anymore.

Arrow after arrow he shot into the pool of light. Oliver knew his fingers bled, but he didn't feel it. Targeting on instinct, but still not enough to stop the thoughts from flooding his brain. He saw her perpetually nervous smile, her closed lashes as he leaned in to kiss her. He heard her jittery babble and the soft velvet of her voice in his ear. He smelled home in her hair and the hollows of her wrists. He felt the smallness of her hand in his and the softness of her lips. He tasted the salt of her tears and the sweetness of the smile only she could draw out from him.

She was real to him. She was alive — if only in his head. It was all that he could have hoped for — with her already gone from him. That he could at the very least remember her. That he remembered so much of her that there were too many details to preserve — that even if he repeated one thing he knew and loved about her, every day for the rest of his life, it would never be enough.
His fear used to be that she would die.

But now that she had — his fear was that he would forget her, and let her die all over again.

Oliver reached for another arrow and grasped empty air. It belatedly dawned on him that he'd emptied his quiver, firing blindly into the light. His fingertips had begun to sting from the open cuts, and he let his hand fall empty to his side.

The air had fallen silent around him — without even the whispers of the ghosts he hoped to hear. He sighed, heavily.

"Diggle," he said. "I know you're here."

Oliver turned as Diggle emerged from behind a cabinet, Roy just behind him. They both looked more worries than concerned that he was going to shoot them.

"Didn't want to interrupt," said Diggle, cautiously taking a seat at the edge of the practice area.

"If that was true," said Oliver, retrieving his arrows from the wall, "you wouldn't have followed me all the way back here."

Roy raised his hand sheepishly. "That was my idea, actually. I thought you were going to do something heroic-slash-stupid." He scratched a spidering bruise on his neck, an aftereffect of the gas. "We were worried about you."

Oliver gave them both a look, but when he tried to say I'm fine, to lie, his throat seized up.

The two of them silently glanced at each other.

"Do you want to try that again?" Diggle asked.

Oliver felt the first stirrings of irritation. "I'm — not — falling to pieces, okay? I just —" He exhaled, calming himself. "I just need — to keep going. Ra's isn't done yet, and neither am I. We need to plan, and we need to do it now."

"Oliver."

"Not now, Roy."

"No."

Oliver rounded on him, but Roy — to his credit — stood his ground.

"Look — I wasn't there when it happened, and I know I should've — been there."

Oliver felt a pang of remorse when Roy had to stop, the muscles in his throat working as he swallowed, when he looked at the ground as if he was ashamed, then back at Oliver again. Because he wasn't blaming Roy, because he'd never blamed Roy. It was bad enough he'd been hit by the gas, even worse that Oliver — who was supposed to be his mentor — hadn't even made sure he was all right after being trapped with his worst nightmares for six hours.

"I'm sorry," Roy said simply, before Oliver could speak. "But we're not forcing you back on your feet. We all need time — and you do too. Even if it's just for an hour, maybe two. Just take a break."

"Lyla's running down some leads, finding out what she can." Diggle stepped forward, his arms
folded. "You'll help too — but not like this, man."

Oliver looked at them and was silent for a long minute. Then he nodded, slowly. A common trait everyone seemed to have on the team was a unifying stubbornness, and this time he was willing to listen.

He reached out and gripped Roy's shoulder. "I know what the Pit can do to you, so if you ever need to talk about what you saw — I'm here."

Roy looked up at Oliver with a flash of guilty trepidation, and Oliver knew — his fear was something unspeakable. Something he didn't want to tell Oliver about.

But Oliver knew what it was like to bottle up his worst fear — holding Felicity in his arms and dying — and how it felt when he'd finally told her, standing at the edge of the Pit.

"Was it Thea?" he asked, not as her older brother, but as a mentor who wanted to help him face his fears and come out stronger.

"I could go," Diggle offered. "Let you two talk it out."

"No," Roy said, with a jerk of his head. "No. It's just that I don't know where to start. Dig told me that I'd been under for six hours when I came to — but I swear to God it felt like I'd been dreaming for days."

"There were other things I remember being freaked out about when I first woke up. Stuff about my dad, my mom, the Undertaking, Brother Blood — but then the worst parts of the dream came back." He glanced up at Oliver, a flash of bright blue. "It was — Thea. At first I dreamed that I ran into her while I was still under the Mirakuru and I was watching my body from the outside — killing her."

Oliver inhaled softly, bracing for the words of comfort, but Roy wasn't done. The words came faster, and he was even stumbling on them, as if they were coming to quickly to control.

"Then the dream changed. It wasn't me killing her, but she was there. Something was off about her, like I was watching her through a mirror, or she was kinda holding herself differently. She was harder, somehow. Like her skin was broken glass and she wanted to hurt me. She told me things that were hard to hear — about our breakup, how I lied to her, how much she used to trust us, and she fought me." Roy scratched his neck, clawing at the purplish tracery of veins at his throat. "I fought back. It went on for so long — but then suddenly it wasn't her anymore, but it was everyone I knew. You were there, Diggle, Felicity — it was you guys, but it wasn't. They all had something off about them, like they were impostors trying too hard to be you, and I knew they weren't real — but everything they told me was so true."

Roy finally came to a stop, like a reel of string run out, and looked up at Oliver. "Was that how the League hurt you?"

Oliver considered the question. "Hurt to them was a by-product of the training. Fear was a kind of lesson — to make you lose your humanity by turning away the things they tell you — the things that make you feel guilty, and human. It took me a year to find out that the way to get through it and not lose myself was to face my fears until I understood what they were trying to tell me."

"Every day — for a year?" Roy went pale. "How did you stay sane? I almost throttled Dig when I first got out of the coma."

Oliver raised his eyebrows. "I lead a double life as a hooded vigilante who uses a bow and arrow, and I was shipwrecked on a hellish island for five years. Who says I'm sane?"
It took them a second to realize he was making a joke, patently true and simultaneously tragic. Roy smiled and shook his head like a family member had just told a bad joke, and Oliver felt another pang of longing as he waited for but never heard Felicity's response, the flippant comment lacking any sort of verbal filter. The kind that could always make him smile.

It surprised him when Diggle's hand came down on his shoulder in a firm clasp. "I know, man," said Diggle, gently, as if he knew what Oliver was thinking. "I know."

— "Oliver Queen."

Oliver spun around, an arrow notched in his bow and pointed towards the source of the voice, the darkness at the corners of the Foundry.

"Nyssa," he said, in a voice low with suppressed fury. "What are you doing here?"

Her footsteps grew closer, deliberately loud because she usually walked with a soundless tread, as if she was trying to ridicule them for not noticing her presence before.

"I seem to have come at a time of mourning," she said, and he imagined her eyes glittering with triumph.

"Don't," he said, dangerously quiet.

Still she stayed in the shadows, hovering at the edge of the light.

"My gift to you," she said, and hurled something at them.

The object thudded heavily and rolled across the floor, coming to a rest near their feet. The sight of it simultaneously made Oliver's hands shake with anger and his heart die — all over again.

It was a black body bag, surprisingly small, but impossible to deny. Beside him, he heard Roy's sharp inhalation, the click of Diggle's gun — and knew that they were all murderously angry.

They said people looked smaller in death. Felicity had always seemed small to Oliver, but the space that she'd held in Oliver's eyes — it had always seemed impossible. Even when they'd stood chest to chest, the top of Felicity's head had always reached just above his chin. He remembered the scent of her hair when he kissed her forehead. How easily it'd been to press his lips to her skin.

He found that he couldn't bear to think of her being small and insignificant in death. Even more than he hated the idea of opening the body bag and seeing her cold and lifeless on the Foundry table — when it should have been him.

Oliver was so ready to shoot and kill Nyssa. Because she — of all people — knew what it meant to lose someone like Felicity. Sara did to Nyssa what Felicity's death was doing to Oliver, and that was what made it unforgivable.

Of all people, she knew what it was like to lose that light.

"Who," said Oliver. "Ra's – or you?"

Nyssa stepped slowly into the light. She lowered her hood and met all their gazes with unflinching calm, as if her life wasn't hanging in the balance.

"Perhaps I killed her for your betrayal, Oliver Queen." She cocked her head. "Perhaps I killed her on my father's orders. Perhaps I've brought the League here with me."
"She's lying, Oliver," said Diggle.

"I'm with Dig," said Roy. "She killed Felicity – why are we even discussing this?"

Nyssa only smiled. "Ah," she purred. "Who says that she is dead?"

As if on cue, they all looked down at the bag. Then, right before their eyes, it shuddered.

"Ah," said Nyssa. She drew her knife and in one downward slash she tore through the front of the bag. For a moment, the three of them were suspended in confusion, until Nyssa braced her heel against the bag and kicked.

Felicity spilled out of the body bag in a rush, clutching her throat and coughing like she'd never breathed before.

"Frack," she croaked, rolling onto her side. "Oh frack."

Chapter End Notes

Team Arrow reunited again :)

Anyways, I forgot to say this in the last update, but 2015 has seriously been a great year to be an Olicity fan. Sinceriously. Not only did the show ditch some of my less favorite plot-lines, it seems like they're putting Olicity front and center in the romance department — and guys, that's where it should be. I honestly never thought I'd write and continue a fifty-plus chapter fanfiction, but it just goes to show how great the Olicity story is, in all its roller coaster and insanity-inducing glory. Olicity fans on Tumblr, FF, AO3, Facebook not only prove how great the Olicity story is, but how great it can be.

2015, fingers crossed, is going to be the year of Olicity. Cheers :)


Felicity choked herself awake. Her head felt like it was about to burst from the choked-on-a-fishbone coughing fit. She rolled onto her side, clawing at the slippery material snagging her waist and legs.

A zipper.

She'd been in a body bag.

"Frack." With her throat clear again, she could smell the concrete and dusty pipes and metal. "Oh frack," she said, as the watering in her eyes subsided and her vision zeroed in on the far wall — peppered with a constellation of arrows.

The Foundry.

Her sense of relief evaporated when Nyssa's face appeared above her. Before she could squirm away, Nyssa's hand fisted in the front of Felicity's shirt and she hauled her straight off the ground, an arm curled across her neck and the edge of a knife pressing on her throat.

Felicity gasped for breath as she saw the three shocked faces gaping at her — mainly the three people she thought she'd never lay eyes on again, what with the non-reversible evacuation route she'd sent them on and the threat of execution hovering over her head.

Then again, the last thing she remembered was being on her knees for execution and having her neck twisted to breaking point by Nyssa al Ghul, but that also seemed to be a minor detail in the scheme of things.

"Now," said Nyssa, speaking near Felicity's ear. "An explanation, Oliver Queen, and be quick about it. Or I would not be so sure about her escaping death once more."

Felicity's world existed at the edge of a knife, and the point of an arrow. Her eyes met Oliver's with a faint shiver, and an understanding passed between them. The last time she'd had a weapon at her throat, it was Slade, and before that, it was the Count. Given how those incidents had each turned out, there was a 50/50 shot of Oliver going either way.

But he didn't know the piece of information that would change it all.

"Waller's dead," Felicity said, her voice grating from disuse and Nyssa's arm pressing firmly on her vocal chords. "Ra's brought everyone out — captured ARGUS agents, me — and he killed her in front of us. Then he —" Her throat hurt too much to continue.

"—Then he gave the order for the rest to die," Nyssa finished. "Felicity would be dead were it not for me."
Felicity saw the surprised flicker in Oliver's eyes — and knew that he truly hadn't expected Nyssa to save her — that he'd honestly thought, just like she did, that they'd seen each other for the last time when those elevator doors closed.

His grip on the bow shifted, but didn't loosen. Neither did the razor edges in his stare.

"Ol-i-ver," she croaked, her voice fraying. Please. Not for me.

Waller was dead, and her death meant that Nyssa al Ghul was their last chance if they were going to beat her father. Now that he knew what she did, he had to see that. He had to see that Nyssa was their only option.

The danger in Oliver's eyes lingered for only a second more, and then he gave a small — nearly imperceptible — nod. He tossed the arrow away, sent it skittering towards them across the floor, and lowered his bow, holding it loosely by his side.

"I swear we didn't know about Amanda's drones. We just wanted to get the children out of Nanda Parbat, and I was going to come back. But Waller had all of us and she wouldn't let me go."

"Children?" Nyssa asked, and Felicity felt her grip waver — but only a fraction. "What children? The League's?"

Oliver shook his head. "Cheshire. She'd been smuggling children for almost a decade, from all over the world. I'm guessing she did it while she was on assignments for the League. She was keeping them in the old supply houses in Nanda Parbat, and when we tracked her there we had no idea — until we found the children. Then we had to get them out."

"It was bad luck that one of them happened to be Amanda Waller's kid," said Diggle, his hand still rested on the butt of his gun. "Or maybe you had something to do with that?"

"The League has no need to steal children from the outside world," Nyssa snapped. "If Cheshire truly is doing what you say — she isn't working on my orders."

"Was," Oliver corrected, shortly. "She came after us and I had to do what was necessary. I apologize if you wanted her alive for interrogation."

Nyssa made a small dismissive noise. "She was a good fighter, but I have no use for a servant who works to her own ends. Just as well you took care of her — an unintentional favor for me, and an intended boon for yourself, I suppose."

Felicity jerked at Nyssa's arm then, because she couldn't have chosen a better way to hurt Oliver than imply that he killed for sport. It showed, briefly, on Oliver's face before it vanished.

Nyssa made a sound of amusement beside Felicity's ear. "Ah," she murmured, twisting a curl of Felicity's hair around her forefinger. "I see why he almost gave up his city for you, Sa'id'a. Tell me, did Cheshire foolishly get her claws around Felicity's neck?"

Neck, Felicity thought, is an understatement.

Oliver said nothing, his jaw clenched. Nyssa's mouth curled into a smirk, as if it amused her greatly to make Oliver bleed.

"So tell me, once and for all," she said, her knife pressing on Felicity's skin, "Oliver Queen, why I should trust you and your people after you left my city half-destroyed and abandoned our original pact?"
Fair point.

Oliver raised his sleeve, showing the scar in his wrist — from a knife blade. He stared unwaveringly at Nyssa. "Our blood oath still stands. I want a world without Ra's al Ghul, the same as you, except now Amanda Waller is dead, and your father has a new stronghold in Starling City. Unless you're willing to turn on him with just your army and fight it out based on numbers alone, you're going to need some sort of advantage."

"And you think your connection to ARGUS is a trump card?" Nyssa said mockingly. "Even if I was prepared to accept the numbers you could add to my army, we tore down their defenses and executed their leader before their eyes. You're going to have to do better than that, Oliver Queen."

"I know." Oliver twisted the bow in his hand. "That's why I'm willing to do whatever it takes. Even if it means giving myself up to Ra's al Ghul as bait."

A beat, as the words sank in.

"Whatever it takes," Nyssa repeated. "Truly, Oliver?"

Oliver let the bow fall from his open hand. "Even if it kills me."

Nyssa lightly twisted the knife, and Felicity suppressed a shudder as the cold steel grated over her skin. She could tell that Nyssa was watching Oliver, because Felicity was watching him too.

Felicity knew him. She knew the look when Oliver Queen was about to sacrifice himself. It was the Oliver-Queen-Stupid-Sacrifice look, the stubborn-as-an-ox, fight-you-on-everything stare, the one with his walls of granite way up.

This wasn't it.

Oliver's defenses were down, and — Felicity realized this with a start — he was looking only at her. There was something beautiful about his expression, something innocent. Like he knew what he was sacrificing himself for and there was no one who could convince him otherwise — no fight he couldn't win.

Felicity's heart sank as she realized two things.

The first — that Nyssa would believe him, because Oliver wasn't lying.

The second — that she was going to lose Oliver again, and this time she would know why.

And it would kill her.

"Truthfully," Nyssa said, "words are just that — mere words. I cannot be sure whether I can trust you. But I do know that you are a terrible liar, and that the woman is dead — and with her your only other chance of defeating my father. Whether by loyalty or pragmatism, our paths forward are joined — like it or not." She flicked the knife back into the palm of her hand with a soft snick. "That will have to do."

Nyssa stepped away from Felicity, who staggered as soon as her hands released their choking grip. Whether Oliver moved first — or she did — she crashed right into Oliver's chest and his arms closed around her before she could fall again. Diggle immediately went full-on medic while Roy stood protectively over them all. But Felicity just clenched her hands tight in the front of Oliver's shirt and held on, her forehead resting against his thudding heartbeat. It was almost too much to believe — that she was back with them, back in the Foundry.
Nyssa was a shadow at the edge of Felicity's vision when she turned back to look at the four of them. Oliver's hands tightened around Felicity as he glared over her head at Nyssa.

"Tomorrow," Nyssa said, tilting her head back and surveying the Foundry. "You'll need a new hideaway, I think. This one is a little too…airy. Oliver, you remember how the League leaves messages. Let me know where that might be, or I'll have to start killing citizens of Starling to find out."

With a last smirk, she strode into the darkness and vanished.

Felicity let out her breath suddenly, more stunned than anything else — that Nyssa really had let her go. She reached for Diggle and Roy, holding their hands so tightly she must have hurt them — but she couldn't help herself.

More than ever she felt Oliver's solid presence, the tightness of his grip around her waist, at the back of her head — him pulling back so that he could see her, pushing her hair off her face and murmuring comforting things she couldn't hear over the sound of her pulse. But she nodded, her hands encircling his wrists in a gesture rapidly becoming habit, closing her eyes as he rested his forehead against hers.

"Oliver," Felicity said, breathlessly. If she kissed him once she swore that she'd never be able to stop. But this was more important, because it would change everything. "Wait, wait, wait."

Oliver stopped, looking down at her in surprise.

"I met him — in the ARGUS prison — Mr. Yamashiro. He told me about the pit — the Lazarus pit —"

Felicity opened her eyes, opened them wide. "Ra's al Ghul — he's not immortal."
"Maseo?" Oliver said. He felt Felicity's hair slide between his fingers as he took a step back. The name brought back flashes of a frantic city, Waller's merciless disassembly of his conscience, and the small quiet in the strangeness of it all — the Yamashiro family.

Maseo Yamashiro. The ARGUS agent handpicked by Waller to convert Oliver into the kind of malleable, morally ambiguous asset she could use on her chessboard. Handler. Mentor. Friend.

He was supposed to be dead. Killed by the yakuza. Him, his wife Tatsu and their son Akio — the only home Oliver had known since Lian Yu — all dead.

Oliver should have known that when it came to Waller, only seeing a body would suffice for proof of death.

"Who's Yamashiro?" Diggle asked, looking from Oliver to Felicity. "How would he know about the Lazarus pit?"

"He said his wife…died, and he brought her back using the pit. He said he was an ARGUS asset." Felicity looked nervous for some reason, but all he could see in front of his eyes — painfully bright, agonizingly clear — was a door left slightly ajar, swinging inward at the touch of his fingertips…to a ransacked apartment stained with blood. And everyone — gone.

"Waller put him in prison after he defected. Or he refused to share the secret. I don't know, she didn't exactly say, what with the assassins hauling us out of the cell and her penchant for mind games."

Oliver could sense Felicity's stare, waiting for him to fill in the gaps, but he was as lost as she was. The Maseo he'd met in Hong Kong had been the most pragmatic individual he'd known — almost on par with Diggle in his response to the idea of supernatural elements.

Tatsu, on the other hand, she'd been…different. Ethereal. In between bouts of curt replies and icy stares, she'd told stories. Not to him, but to her son, Akio. His Japanese was patchy at best, but once upon a time sounded the same — whatever language it was said in. On the rare days when Oliver wasn't out on assignment with Maseo, he used to lie awake in his bed and listen to Tatsu's soft voice, her fluttering hands painting shadows on the paper-screen doors as she made her son laugh with the dramatic gestures to go with her bedtime stories.

Moira had never been the type to sit by Oliver's bed and tell him stories — he'd replaced that tradition with a bedside confessional of the transgressions he'd committed with Tommy that day. Nonetheless, listening to Tatsu and Akio reminded him of his home in Starling City. Especially when the days had been filled with Waller's new tests and hurdles to try and see how much of his conscience she could dismantle and burn.

Oliver could imagine it. If anyone were to believe in the Lazarus pits, it would have been Tatsu. The psychology of a lost spouse wasn't something Oliver had experienced, but he could imagine. Maseo would have been so devastated by Tatsu's death — maybe he would have tried to be more like her, as if by taking up part of her personality he could keep her alive and with him. With a pang, Oliver realized how lucky he was to have escaped that brutal choice.
Tatsu and Akio and Maseo — they were ghosts in Oliver's memory as well. Except Maseo had resurfaced and Waller had gone in his place. Another ghost — another message.

"Doesn't matter," Oliver said curtly, his mind reverting to the present. "We know what we know."

The van jolted on a patch of rough road, and Felicity turned instinctively to look out the window, squinting against the late afternoon sunlight. Every few minutes Felicity found herself taking stock of her surroundings, as if she was trying to reassure herself that it was all real. She was in a van with Diggle, Roy and Oliver. They were speeding towards the secondary Foundry. She wasn't dead. They were going to fight a war.

"Maybe we should stop calling ourselves Team Arrow," Roy said, turning around in the front seat. "I like 'Team Undead'."

"We do seem to be developing a lucky streak for coming back alive," Diggle added, with a glance at Felicity in the rearview mirror.

"I don't feel very lucky," Felicity said, suppressing a shudder as she thought about the other very authentic corpses in body bags, lying somewhere inside the ARGUS bunker or waiting to be discovered in Starling City.

A lot of people died today, I should have been one of them.

Felicity felt Oliver's hand slip into hers, pressing gently in wordless reassurance, as if he'd sensed her thoughts wandering. They hadn't had time to be alone yet — to talk — but Felicity wasn't sure if she had the words for it. The bombshell about Ra's al Ghul's immortality seemed to take up every square inch of their collective focus, because with the fall of ARGUS, now more than ever they needed to win, and it was selfish to think about them — capitalized Them — in the scheme of everything else. Just like Felicity couldn't fight Oliver on his conviction to give himself up in some warped reciprocation of what she'd done. The city came first.

Hence, the silence. Because both of them knew what the other was going to say.

"Right now, all we can do is try our best to shut Ra's al Ghul down," Diggle said. "Even though I don't necessarily agree with our deal with the Devil."

Neither Roy nor Diggle seemed to like Nyssa very much. To be fair, Felicity wasn't sure she liked Nyssa most of the time, or whether it was just pity. Nyssa had lost the love of her life in Sara and in her hatred towards her father, she'd isolated herself from all sources of affection and kindness. One of those alone had the potential to poison a soul with bitterness, much less the void Felicity saw in Nyssa's eyes.

But there was always something. Always a kindness in someone.

"Nyssa's Vulcan Nerve Pinch technically saved my life," Felicity said, rubbing the back of her neck, purple with a rapidly forming bruise. "I believe in her."

Roy folded his arms, skeptical to the last. "She brought you back in a body bag."

"Well she wasn't going to Fed-Ex me out of the place," Felicity answered, reasonably.

"All right," Diggle interrupted, as if he sensed that Roy was about to retort. "I think the real question is — can we trust Nyssa with the League of Assassins? If she does manage to kill her father, then the League passes on to her. Do we want that?"
It was a pragmatic question, and it showed that Diggle was already thinking ahead — past the death of Ra's al Ghul. They all looked to Oliver, because he was the only one who could truly answer that question, knowing what the League was like from the inside. How it trained recruits, how it ran as an underground city, how it functioned as a weapon in Ra's al Ghul's hand, and if all went well — Nyssa's.

Oliver took his time answering, and when he did, his voice was flat, his words measured. "Nyssa isn't like her father. She could have killed me or turned me in to Ra's a hundred times over — and she didn't. That counts for something."

"Because she had a use for you," Diggle reminded him. "And she does now. She will use you to kill her father — and you seem to be okay with being the knife in her hand that breaks."

"Just because I said I'd do anything doesn't mean I have to," said Oliver. "It might not come to that."

"I've missed this," Felicity said, lightly. "Plotting against nefarious evil — one van ride at a time."

She squeezed Oliver's hand silently, and was relieved to see him smile.

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Oliver had really branched out in his selection of hideout locations. Underground basement, underground basement, abandoned clock tower (emergencies only) and underground tunnel. Maybe she was going nuts, but she was starting to see a pattern.

Felicity got out of the van and shivered from the immediate drop in temperature. Abandoned equaled no central heating — silly her.

"How'd you find this place?" she asked, squinting at the abandoned train cars ahead of them. There was even a semi-constructed platform, and one lone wooden bench — lit stark white by construction-grade floodlights running the length of their new hideout.

Oliver got out beside her, setting down the large box in his hands. "My family financed infrastructure development in Starling's early days. The Glades was supposed to be part of their new transport grid, but the station eventually got too expensive to construct, so they abandoned it."

"Cozy, right?" Roy grunted, heaving a rattling box of "computer junk" (his words, not Felicity's) from the back of the van.

He'd just turned to go when Felicity saw something on his neck.

"What's that?" She reached out on instinct and put her hand on the spider-network of veins, pulling his T-shirt collar down to see. Roy almost dropped the box. "Is that a side-effect of the gas? Have you been experiencing dizzy spells? Trouble breathing?"

"Felicity," said Roy, shrugging her hand off (a nice gesture, since regular Roy would have swatted her hand like he was trying to kill a stray fly). "It's nothing. Dig checked me out — blood pressure, heart rate — all normal. The gas didn't leave any permanent damage."

Felicity stared at the part of his collar that hid the bruise, still seeing the worrying vividness of the stains. Her hands itched for her tablet, but she knew it was somewhere on the floor of the command center, riddled with bullets and completely inaccessible. "That is the definition of not being fine," she said, firmly. "As soon as I get everything set up I'm calling Caitlin and sending her pictures. Maybe a blood sample."

"Already done," said Diggle. He'd come around from the other side of the van, keys in hand.
"Felicity, right now what we're gonna do is make sure you get some rest. if that means a complete media/Wi-Fi/technology blackout, so be it. But you're getting at least eight hours of sleep."

Felicity’s heart swelled painfully with a mushy hot cocoa-fest of feelings, reminding her again that there were people who cared about her, and she cared so much for them, because they were family — imposed bedtimes and refusing medical attention and all that fun stuff. Felicity went to Diggle and gave him a hug, standing on her tiptoes. After a beat, she pulled Roy in as well, who submitted reluctantly to a hug and kiss on the cheek. Then she pulled back and gave them all a look. "None of you knew how to set up the Wi-Fi, huh?"

Diggle was the first to chuckle, and pulled Felicity in for another bear hug. "You're irreplaceable, Felicity," he said, and she squeezed her eyes shut, feeling precariously close to tears.

"Okay, well," she said, pulling away to wipe her eyes on her ash-and-blood-smeared sleeve, "now you've just made it all awkward."

Diggle smiled over her shoulder at Oliver — ever the neat freak — who was still moving boxes from the van. "We'll leave you to it."

Just like old times, Felicity thought, when Diggle and Roy exchanged a knowing look and left her alone with Oliver. Subtlety was really not anyone's strong suit on Team Arrow.

Felicity turned back to Oliver a little awkwardly, her hands fidgeting by her sides. He was sitting on the edge of the van, watching her in his quiet inscrutable way. There was still so much she hadn't said to him, about ending things the way she had, the unanswered questions about Yamashiro and the knowledge that Oliver was hovering dangerously close to sacrificing himself again. She'd already noticed the bandage across his right hand, a fresh injury she didn't have to guess the reason behind.

A well-worn part of her — the one with the cocktail of abandonment issues and low self-esteem — still wondered why someone like Oliver Queen would hurt himself at the thought of her dying, why he would care, period. A louder part of her wanted to put her lips on his wound and promise — as if she could — that she'd never do it again.

No part of her wanted to apologize for doing what she'd done — because she'd wanted to save him and if given the choice, she would choose to save Oliver Queen all over again. But she did regret causing him pain, the same kind of pain she'd feel — if not worse — if he died trying to fight Ra's al Ghul.

"Come here," Oliver said, softly, and she did.

Felicity moved to stand between his knees, and he gently tugged her closer still, his arms around her waist, hands clasped in the small of her back. She rested her hands on his shoulders, traced her thumb down the shadow of his jawline. His eyes were closed, but he leaned easily into her touch, as if it was an instinctive response.

"Hey," he said, his eyes flickering open. "You can tell me anything – you know that."

That was a statement of the truth Felicity didn't know how to answer. When she was surrounded by the team, she felt like nothing had changed. She was happy — ecstatic — to be not-dead, but the more her mind churned with thoughts that increasingly slipped her control, Felicity didn't quite know if she was strictly speaking okay. As for telling him, she didn't know where to start.

Waller's execution would be on loop inside her head for the conceivable future, the flash of Ra's al Ghul's midnight sword as it sliced through the air and separated bone from bone — in her nightmares
where Waller would predictably be replaced by Oliver. The spurt of hot blood across her chest, soaked through her clothes and into her skin, a vivid reminder of the war.

Even though she'd told them about it — everything that'd happened since the elevator doors slammed shut — just telling them was different from having the images in her head and having to decide what to tell, what she could describe, in her trademark sentence fragments. That she'd seen the ghoulis smile on Waller's decapitated head and sensed the infectious terror radiating off a hundred or more ARGUS agents about to die. That she'd felt the sting of grooved steel beneath her knees and the screaming inside her head that told her she wasn't ready to die — not by a long shot.

For once, it was proving to be too much. Too much death, too much loss, and as much as she tried, she couldn't tell herself that it was something she could brush off and smile after. She felt like a pane of glass with one too many splinters, a time bomb with delayed detonation.

When she smiled at Oliver, it was a tired smile. Telling herself she was just tired.

Slowly, her hands slid down the side of his face, came to rest against his heartbeat. "I'm fine," she said, as if she meant it.

Chapter End Notes

The Yamashiros, as you can probably tell, are going to be different from the show. Take it how you will. (I still have no idea what they're planning to do about them but we'll find out on January 21, won't we?)
Felicity turned on the shower and slid carefully down the wall until she came to rest against the floor, her knees curled to her chest. Hot water and steam gradually plastered her hair to her face, clothes to her skin, a trail of ash and blood snaking its way towards the drain.

_Breathe_, she told herself, _breathe._

Oliver had gone to leave a message for Nyssa. She still had a little time to fall apart before putting herself carefully together again, a child piecing together the fragments of a shattered treasure, a crime scene covered up.

Before he'd gone, Felicity felt his hands on her face and the longing in her belly, and she was so ready for it to be all okay.

But it wasn't. To Oliver, Felicity was better than his darkness, better than the past he was afraid of sharing. But just saying it didn't make it true. Felicity was just better at pretending she was okay, and there was a crack in the facade that she didn't know how to deal with, a new kind of horror that twisted and mangled her insides to raw, weeping shreds.

_There's blood on my skin I'm scared won't wash out._

_There's a scar and a darkness in my heart I'm scared will haunt me._

_I gave myself up and now I'm scared you'll do the same._

_Scared._

She hated the word. It made her feel little, her shoulders hunched, like she was fifteen again and trying to hide from the world instead of making her place in it.

_Scared._

It wasn't just that, though. Five years on the island and what she knew about his time on Lian Yu could be counted on one hand, as evidenced by a certain Mr. Yamashiro she'd met in an ARGUS prison cell. It never used to bother Felicity how little she really knew about Oliver — because she'd always known what mattered. That he was a good man with a history he regretted and a past that haunted him, that he had a shadow of darkness behind his eyes but a heart of immeasurable light. She knew that someone like Oliver Queen would never see himself completely as a hero, but had a soul too pure to dwell in the shadows. That used to be enough.

But.

It wasn't fair towards Oliver, what she was thinking. That she felt like an idiot when someone like Waller could laugh at her for loving Oliver and tell her, smirking, that there was more darkness in him that he would ever share. It was unfair, because she knew there was plenty of darkness in Oliver, struggling against the light in his soul that flickered at times, giving her cause to fear. But she'd chosen to love him — this man — for all his complexity, for all his contradictions and jagged edges and faded scars.
Though Felicity was willing to bet that his (quote) bad experiences (endquote) outstripped hers by miles, there was no doubt that she'd witnessed a horror, and there was something about horrors that raised a lump in her throat, a very specific kind that barred any attempt to try and describe every inch, every detail, in an effort to exorcise them.

Without realizing it, her hand came up to encircle her throat. It had never seemed more fragile to her, a little bit of bone and sinew holding the brain and body together. So easy to sever — just like that.

You can tell me anything, he'd said.

But what if — what if Oliver only loved her because she didn't have his scars, because she didn't have the broken edges? Diggle said that she was Oliver's hope — but what if that was all she was to him? How could she tell him that she wasn't feeling very hopeful, that for once — she was the one who felt broken?

Felicity pressed her head into her knees and bit back a scream of frustration, because she didn't have an answer.

Oliver was a dead man. To the rest of Starling City, at least. He was another washed-up ex-billionaire, a trust fund brat who'd slipped through the cracks after trying his hand at the hard game of reality. To be fair, he'd been playing with weighted dice, inheriting his family's company without the qualifications or the vested time in running a business.

That didn't make losing any better. And to be very fair, Oliver had lost in an epic fashion. But that was a life he'd put on hold, a life he'd promised Diggle to resume, when the war was over.

It wasn't the first time he'd had to pretend to be homeless and inconspicuous in a city full of watching eyes, and it was far from the last. After leaving the messages for Nyssa, he'd "borrowed" enough newspapers to confirm Lyla's suspicions that the government and Starling City were covering up what was going on inside ARGUS, and that there'd been no demands.

Yet.

He trusted Nyssa — as little as that counted for — to know that seeing bodies strung up around Starling City was not something their alliance could withstand.

Oliver hadn't been in Starling City for a year, and there were loose ends to check on. The fading daylight allowed for perfect camouflage in his vigil on the Starling rooftops, crouched like a bird surrounded by his urban foliage, he watched a certain apartment in a high-end residential building for signs of life.

Like he'd caught a scent, Oliver raised his head, just a little, as his sister came into view. It was almost time for her to be at the club, and he'd relied on his memory of her daily schedule to guess when he'd most likely see her.

And there she was. He saw her scoop up the small heap of mail under the ridiculously cheery doormat (he'd told her so many times to get that removed, hardwood floors didn't need a doormat), and sift through it with the air of focused interest, her elbows resting on the kitchen countertop. Her hair had gotten longer, lighter in the roots like it'd been bleached by the sun. Oliver found himself wondering if she was eating enough, if she was sleeping, whether her bones were too prominent in her skin — slipping into the patterns of an (albeit absentee) older brother, like he'd never left.

When Oliver had received Ra's al Ghul's ultimatum and made the choice to leave, the only excuses he'd made and the only goodbye he'd allowed himself had gone to Thea. She was his sister, Speedy,
the only family left in the world. Maybe because he'd counted extensively on his ability to lie to her for protection, and maybe because he'd known from the start that the team wouldn't have let him go — not without a fight.

Because the team could see right through Oliver. Nanda Parbat had been the one-way trip, the end of his life as the Arrow and Oliver Queen. But Thea didn't know. She would let him go — and she did — because she thought that he would come back.

Oliver's attempt at keeping up with the backpacking facade had fallen through when the League of Assassins had closed ranks around him. Roy (who was still reticent about the topic of Thea) mentioned that Felicity had kept track of his accounts, both financial and email, just in case he showed up anywhere in the world. But it ended up with her taking over the management of Oliver Queen's disappearance, hijacking his email account and phone number to keep Thea from suspecting that he was anywhere other than backpacking around the world.

Felicity really did know him too well.

Oliver watched silently until the setting sun stretched his shadows long across the gravel surface, until Thea had to leave, snagging her purse from a coatrack by the exit and hooking the door shut with her foot.

More than ever, Oliver was reminded of the life he had waiting for him, the one he could return to. Family. Inside his head, the pieces were falling into place, like a picture coming slowly into focus. Starling City was a reason for him to be the Arrow, to don the mask and hood again, to serve. Thea was a reason for him to be Oliver Queen, a reminder of his life outside the mask, but Felicity was different. She knew him — both with the mask and without, better than anyone else — and she was the glue that held the pieces together. A reason for him to live.

Felicity pulled a monitor from one of the crates, searching for a place to put it. Her very own train compartment was starting to look like an electronic hoarder's den. The rest of the tables were already occupied by blazing computer screens, wires spilling from the back of the monitors like multicolored spaghetti — the kind that would give the neat freak in Oliver an aneurysm — and across the floor like a trip hazard. She'd already accumulated a few new bruises from falling over and a couple of blunt (but very solid) edges, but it was better than standing still and reminding herself that there were edges she hadn't smoothed over, things left unfixed.

Moving with nervous energy, Felicity was running on fumes, and she wasn't ready to stop. There was always something to do. And to be perfectly honest, she wasn't anywhere close to closing her eyes and actually falling sleep. She was wearing clothes from her Foundry stash, a collection of sweatpants and t-shirts she used to change out of her work clothes for — well-worn from settling in for a long night in the Foundry, waiting for one of her programs to ping and announce that voila, it'd found Oliver Queen.

Felicity adjusted her glasses, sitting back to check the screen. She'd installed the monitor in its new place, perched on an old train seat like an ornamental globe.

"Good," she muttered, and cracked her knuckles, getting to work.

Felicity jumped at a noise, a little crick in the walls. Contraction in the metal panels — the temperature was probably dropping because of nightfall. She shook her head slightly and went back to typing in half-darkness. She felt like a kid hiding under the covers with a flashlight again, working past her bedtime. In this case, the eight hours of sleep Diggle and the others had imposed on her. Of
course she was tired, but she also didn't want any mental detours into places she'd rather avoid. Work required concentration, and concentration deprived the trauma-reliving parts of her brain of the spotlight.

And her job required concentration, all right.

Typical that none of them knew how to set up a decent Wi-Fi signal — then again, they'd thought she was dead. That was a problem fixed around oh — two hours ago. She'd moved past the dismal attempt at Internet connectivity and moved on to their electrical and by extension, security systems.

She reached behind her computer and fiddled with the tangled mass of wires she knew would drive Oliver insane if he ever saw them, possibly because the color-coding was something only she would understand. A rudimentary system had been laid out, but none of the boys had made calculations about the maximum power levels their generators could stand. Felicity chewed her lip as she ran through the calculations one more time (i.e. to make sure that the extra power consumption caused by her computers wouldn't bust the circuitry) and tapped on the final key.

"And bingo," she said, as the blinds pulled low over her windows lit up white.

There were construction floodlights set up on every corner of the new space, and Felicity had just hooked them up to the main system and turned them all on. She cracked her knuckles in satisfaction and looked around.

"Now what?" she said, to herself.

Chapter End Notes

I know that Felicity's thing is that she'd hopeful and happy and light, but I feel like she needs her own struggle. Especially since most people don't waltz off after a beheading all happy-happy. Do I sound weird? It's probably sleep deprivation. Exam season is tough.
The door was ajar. Well, it was easily opened — what with the fact that it was a train carriage old enough to still have a manual sliding door. Felicity pulled it aside and furtively stepped through, feeling the ground creak beneath her bare feet.

Oliver's space felt like him. (That sounded wrong in her head)

It was practical. Unembellished. No archery trophies or photos — because that would be too college-dorm-room. In lieu of a proper bed was a long leather bench, removed from the original fixtures and retooled back into place, neatly joined with an identical one from the opposite wall to make a bed wide enough to sleep on. It was made as neat as a pin (Oliver tucked the edges of the blanket in, laid the pillow flat). Felicity drew her fingertips across the stainless steel worktable, wondering at the odd bits and pieces placed on top of spread books and papers. They looked like odd carved rocks, mementoes from the island whose significance was only apparent to one person.

There was a set of papers and newspaper articles in a language she didn't understand — Chinese, probably. She blinked uncomprehendingly at the lines of tiny neat characters before turning away. Oliver's bow was set on a crate, beside a row of arrows color-coded for their uses. Felicity turned a non-exploding one over in her hand and ran a fingertip down the smooth curve of the bow — the one she'd gotten for him after doing the very extensive homework, hoping she'd been right about the specifications.

It turned out she was.

Felicity was starting to feel a little better, picking up a sense of normalcy. Her neurotic freakout inside the shower seemed to recede, banished to a corner at the back of her mind like a petulant kid on a time out.

One of Oliver's shirts was draped across a trunk, a collared one with the sleeves still rolled up. Felicity sat on the edge of his bed. Experimentally, covertly, she scooped up the shirt and slipped her arms into the sleeves. The cuffs reached her lower forearm, the hem hanging down past her hips. Oliver could look practically obscene in his shirts — the way they clung to him and highlighted the ever-pressing need for a Perfect Human Specimen Award. On Felicity they looked like something a scarecrow might wear. Or like she'd picked up someone else's laundry hamper by accident (happened before, once in college, once in a Starling City launderette she'd never gone to again).

But Felicity allowed herself a moment of weird, and wrapped the shirt around her body. It still smelled like Oliver, and it helped chase away the chill. She turned on her side and rested her head on his pillow, the buzzing in her head slowing down like a murmur.

Everything smelled soothingly like him. Something salty — like cool white sand beneath her toes — the tang of metal, and something deep and wooded and green. Felicity turned her face into the pillow, squeezing her eyes shut. Oliver's scent helped her feel brave, reminded her that there was a part of her that was fearless.

One more moment of weird, she told herself, eyes still closed like she was trying to preserve the feeling of being okay.
One more moment.

One more.

One.

Felicity was already gone.

Oliver paused to turn off a few of the floodlights, which were blazing brighter than usual. He followed the trail of wires into Felicity's train compartment, expecting to see her asleep at a table, her head on her arms. But it was empty except for the assembled computers, black screens scrolling with incomprehensible lines of code and patterns of thinking too clever for him to follow.

He experienced a brief, irrational surge of anxiety as he mounted the steps to his own train compartment, hoping that she'd be there.

She was, but not in the way he'd expected.

Oliver sat carefully on the edge of his bed, careful not to wake her. Felicity slept as though she wanted to curl into herself, as if she was afraid of taking up too much space. Someone once told him that the way they slept reflected their deepest fears, and hers reminded him of the lonely childhood she scarcely mentioned.

He pulled the edges of the blanket free of the thin mattress and folded it around her body, making sure to cover her bared ankles and shins. The collar of his shirt poked out from the covers, and it set off a guilty pang in him. He should have been there — maybe she'd come looking for him — to finally tell him the truths that weighed down on her. The things she'd seen inside the bunker, the deaths that haunted her still. Felicity wasn't any better at lying than he was, and after the first heady rush of relief that she was alive, Oliver had seen the hairline fractures, the shadow behind her eyes from experiencing the League's justice firsthand.

He'd been so convinced she was dead that he'd glossed over the possibility of having her back alive. And hurt. There was a fresh wound in her arm and something dark in her heart, like Ra's al Ghul had finally succeeded in corrupting the one person that Oliver could never imagine corrupted. He could sense it — the wariness in Diggle and Roy, mingled with the relief. They had Felicity back, but the truth was that none of them had ever imagined she would be the one resurrected — the one who'd lived through something truly terrible. All of them had darkness in their pasts, a separate history of crucibles and accumulated scars both seen and unseen, but like Diggle said — Felicity was the best of them, the constant light in the darkness, and losing her had shown them just how much she'd meant to the team.

It also made him realize how unbelievably lucky he'd been that Ra's al Ghul had lived so long in his universe of underground shadows that he'd forgotten what true light was. Otherwise Oliver knew that Ra's would have seen something in Felicity — and he would never have seen her again.

But he wouldn't have woken her, not with the shadows under her eyes and the bruises standing out against her pale skin. The pillow had nudged her glasses askew, and Oliver pulled them gently from her face and set them on the window ledge, smoothed the hair clouded from sleep.

Oliver let his open hand rest against her cheek for a brief moment, reassured by the steady thrum of life beating under her skin. It was enough.

Reaching for the light switch, he sat on the floor beside the bed, near enough to hear her steady breathing — as reassuring as feeling her pulse beneath his hand — and stretched his legs out across
Felicity dreamed — vividly, silently, terrifyingly. She dreamed of terrors but they slunk away when she tried to remember them and fight back. She twisted and turned in semi-wakefulness until a dark blade swung towards her exposed throat and she screamed herself awake.

Felicity woke in a state of disorientation. Shallow waves of terror still had her heart in a vice-grip and left a bitter taste in her mouth. She was dimly aware that her hands were being loosened from her throat, and that Oliver was the one doing it, talking to her in calming words that were just beginning to register.

"I'm here," he said, again. "I'm here."

Felicity blinked hard, her vision coming into focus again — Oliver's face hovered above hers, near the side of the bed. His bed.

"Bad — bad dream," she stammered, pushing her hair off her face and kicking her way free of the blankets. "I'm sorry — this is your — I was just —"

Oliver shook his head. "I should have been here. I'm sorry — I was leaving a message for Nyssa, and checking up on my sister — but I shouldn't have left you alone."

Felicity was beginning to feel less nauseous. "Not like I gave you a reason to worry," she said, shakily sitting up on her elbows.

Oliver's expression didn't shift from worried. Not by a long shot. "Felicity, you need to work on your excuses if you don't want me to worry."

She almost laughed — almost. At the fact that the both of them were terrible at lying, and terrible at letting people worry about them. Funny ha-ha-ha, if it wasn't also tragic.

Oliver was still sitting at the edge of the bed, as if he was worried about crowding her, as if personal space was what she needed right now. Felicity took him by the forearms and pulled him down to lie beside her, until they were both under the blanket, until their heads were side by side on the pillow and she could see the flecks of gray in his blue eyes.

The words were already in her throat, the admission that was simultaneously fearless and fearful.

"Oliver," she whispered. "I don't feel okay."

Felicity's feet were cold. Oliver knew he would remember every detail. This was what Felicity looked like in the dark. This was what lying in bed beside her felt like. How warm she was. A shared secret between them, and Oliver felt his pulse rise when her eyes met his, a faint shiver of understanding.

"The truth," she said, like she was bracing herself for something painful. "Is that I can't stop seeing the blood. It's on me — and I'm scared it won't come off."

"It's not your fault, Felicity. We warned Waller — you did everything you could."

"Not about Martin," she said, her voice trembling. The words tumbled out of her mouth with such speed that he knew they'd been her burden for a while. "I should have asked her — when we were in the bunker — if there was anything she wanted to say to her son — I could have told him —"
"Felicity," Oliver said, when she stammered to a halt. "Amanda never dealt in half-measures. Conquer or die — and she did. Martin —" He took a breath. "Martin will grow up without his mother, but he won't be alone. You don't owe Amanda anything."

"But she's dead — he killed her in front of me — they're all dead — how can I —?" She broke off with a sound of frustration, the heels of her hands pressing against her eyes. "You're not supposed to see me like this," she said, vehemently. "I'm the one who stops you from doing stupid, reckless things and doing your Oliver-Queen Guilt Spiral — I'm not supposed to be the one pulling a Lady Macbeth and I'm supposed to be able to close my eyes and not see ghosts —"

Oliver didn't know who Lady Macbeth was supposed to be, but he gently took her wrists. They were damp from hidden tears. "Felicity," he said. "Felicity."

She let him take her hands in his, as rigid and tense as branches about to snap from the strain.

"Show me the blood," Oliver said, softly. He opened her palms, running his thumbs across the narrow span of her eternally fidgeting hands, hands that could write and create beautiful and fearsome worlds, hands that were shaking now from blood only she could see.

"Here?" He kissed her fingers in the dark, one at a time.

"Here?" Her delicate, thrumming wrists.

Oliver's hands cupped her face in the dark as he studied her face in silence. If he could have taken on her burdens — all her burdens in the world — in atonement for all the pain he'd ever caused her, he would have. If he could have shown her how much she mattered to him — not because she was somehow pristine and untouched and untroubled — but because she showed him what it was to live. To feel so acutely and so brightly, even through her own pain and shadows and blood — some of his making — to fight the darkness that they all faced and still hope.

To have someone who looked at him and understood, beneath the mask and the undisclosed truths and the scars, just who he was — even before he'd realized it himself.

To love that person long before he'd known it himself, making mistake after mistake, until one day it came to him, when she'd stood in his arms after telling him that she believed in him through everything — whatever happened next.

Felicity leaned into his touch like he found himself leaning into hers, letting him erase the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs.

"Here?" he asked, softer still.

Felicity shook her head slowly. "Oliver." She breathed out, her eyes fluttering closed. "I feel broken. I never thought I'd say this — but I miss being conversationally awkward and having weird inappropriate dreams that I couldn't tell you about for dignity reasons. This —" Her hand splayed across his heartbeat. "— I don't know anymore — how to feel like myself."

Oliver stroked her face as she trailed off, her expression uncertain.

"I do know two things," he said, slowly. "The first is that whatever you do — whatever scars you have — whatever happens next — you will always be the one person who could harness the light inside me — when I didn't think it even existed. You will never stop being my light, Felicity, and I will love you — scars or no scars — broken or whole."

Felicity's eyes flickered open in surprise, moving across his face like they were tracing a line he
couldn't see, like she was trying to see if he meant it.

"And the second thing?" she murmured, very still.

"I love you." That much was simple, that much was easy. Oliver felt himself smile, the same smile of truth and fearlessness he remembered from the bunker, when he'd felt the light on both their faces and told Felicity that he loved her. And knew he would want to do it again, every day for the rest of his life.

Their lives, if she'd have him.

"I love you, Felicity. Whatever happens next."

"Whatever happens next," she said, slow as a promise.

Oliver smoothed the hair from her face and kissed her in the dark. Her hands were in his shirt and pulling him closer still, prolonging the kiss. It was a collision of new sensations and an odd sense of rightness — as if all was as it was meant to be. Their ankles entangling under the covers, his arms crossed at the small of her back to hold her close — chest to chest, her heartbeat pressing against his. Her mouth — still warm on his — turning up in a quiet smile, her fingertips tracing their way down his jaw.

"I'm not broken," she whispered, close to his ear.

"Whatever happens next," he whispered back, and gathered her close.

They would face it all.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the comments and the kudos, they're very kind and an awesome motivation to keep going.

Side note: I've always wanted to write something with them in bed together, and now I have. :) List accomplished. :)))
An Abundance of Crazies

Chapter Notes

Hellooooo, I'm loving the free weekends. Thanks for the good wishes about the exams, and they probably went OK (I think).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Felicity stirred, her cheek flushed and hot — for some reason. It felt like Sunday morning to her — sunlight streaming through the window, but she was too lazy to roll out of bed, a cat sunning itself on the sidewalk. She kept her eyes experimentally closed, as if to test whether she'd be able to sleep some more.

Even though her eyes stayed shut, her mind was already beginning to shake off the sleepiness like a jogger about to do a morning run (reason number one why Felicity never ran, period). Outside sensations were beginning to piece themselves together, a blurry picture slowly taking shape. Oliver's pulse beneath her ear, her hand and cheek on his chest, their limbs entwined beneath the blanket, his breaths stirring the hair at the top of her head.

She was very warm from lying on Oliver's chest. His skin had to be about a hundred degrees on a good day, as if he was carrying molten steel inside his veins. But there were worse things to wake up to, and Oliver in her bed — sadly, wearing clothes — wasn't one of those things.

"Hey," she said, sleepily.

Oliver's eyes flickered open, as quick to wakefulness as a cat. He studied her for a long moment without speaking, his head tilted down to look at her. They were a tangle of arms and legs and Felicity's bed-head. The corners of his mouth twitched upward, and his right hand silently grasped Felicity's, holding it to his chest. The other arm — curled across Felicity's back — started to trace slow, tantalizing circles in her skin.

"Morning," he answered, softly. "How'd you sleep?"

Felicity smiled, resting her chin in the hollow of his chest. "Like I had three benzos."

Oliver's hand stalled. "That's flattering."

"Mm," she said, pressing a kiss into his bandaged knuckles with another sleepy smile. "Put me right to sleep."

Felicity yelped when everything overturned, a flurry of blankets and limbs — and when it all subsided, Felicity was lying on her back and Oliver was looking down at her with amusement.

"Sleep?" he asked, pointedly.

Felicity made a face at him with as much dignity as she could manage, given the fact that Oliver's shirt and her tank top had ridden up to her stomach. "None for me, thanks."

Oliver smiled and bent to kiss Felicity's throat, and she had to suppress the urge to laugh from the sensation of his beard tickling her skin. She never thought she'd say it about Oliver Queen, but he
had a way of chasing away the shadows. For someone who spent his life wrestling with his demons, Oliver did a good job at picking up the slack, at least where Felicity's personal demon-fighting was concerned.

"Thank you, Oliver," Felicity said, quietly.

Oliver's jaw grazed her ear as he pulled away, tilting his head quizzically to the side. "For what?"

She reached for him and cupped his face in her hands. "For…walking into my office holding a laptop riddled with bullet holes. For dropping such ridiculous lies on me that I always know when you're telling the truth now."

Oliver laughed, shaking his head, like he was thinking about the ran-out-of-sports-bottles debacle. Felicity laughed too, pulling herself up — sliding across Oliver's legs until she was practically sitting on top of him, and they were eye to eye. "For trusting me with your secret. For changing my world."

They were both serious now — and very close, close enough to see the truth in each other. Oliver exhaled, his hands encircling Felicity's waist, always careful, always gentle — hands she'd always trust with her burdens and her fears.

"Are you sure?" he asked, in a low voice that made every inch of her — every nerve ending — tingle in pleasant anticipation.

"There's an abundance of crazies and super assassins and mega-criminals," Felicity said, smiling, "but I wouldn't trade it for anything."

As long as I'm with you.

But Oliver knew that.

Oliver's eyes traveled down to her lips — parted slightly with her breaths — and his right hand came up to her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. Felicity closed her eyes as he tilted her chin up for his kiss, and heard him whisper her name just before it came.

Even in urgency, Oliver still touched her like she was too precious to break — too loved to lose, holding her with a kind of infinite tenderness that made her feel more cherished than she ever imagined possible.

And she loved him for it.

Oliver was aware of Felicity's hands, small and nimble, tugging insistently at the hem of his shirt. He ducked his head as she pulled it off — she was laughing between kisses — and tossed it with such terrifically bad aim that it knocked one of the lamps askew. The shirt she'd borrowed from him — large and loose on her — slid completely off one shoulder when she arched backward and pulled him down on top of her.

"Oliver," she said breathlessly, while he explored the base of her throat, "bearing in mind that I've seen you — shirtless — a lot — and you haven't really — well — seen me — um — ah —"

Oliver lifted himself off her, balancing his weight on his arms as he waited patiently for her to finish what he sensed was going to be something quite amusing.

Her face was flushed, and she was practically squirming with embarrassment. "I mean, we've done things — some really — adult things, but — um — don't be too disappointed if there's nothing
particularly impressive going on under these PJs," she said, in a rush.

Oliver had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from laughing outright. "Felicity," he said, reasonably, "there's nothing you could do or be that would disappoint me."

"So you're telling me that you're not expecting any crazy Ninja spin moves?" she asked, straight-faced.

Oliver bent and kissed her, feeling her body shake with laughter beneath his. A novel sensation he was starting to like, outmatched just by the feeling of having her asleep in his arms. "Promise," he said.

Felicity looked at him for a long moment, as if to gauge whether he was serious, and — finally — nodded. Her nerves showed on her face as she lifted her arms over her head, but Oliver was about to put that notion to bed.

It occurred to him — much later — that it was a joke Felicity might have laughed at.

"Oliver," Felicity said, at a highly inconvenient moment, "al—alarm."

"What?" Above her, Oliver just looked confused, his face glistening with sweat. "There's no alarm."

"Computers." She jerked her head in the general direction of her compartment, out of breath from what they'd been-slash-were-still doing. The computerized beeping echoed metallically inside the compartments, because unfortunately she'd had the IQ to make the alarm too loud to ignore. "I rigged a perimeter in case anyone remotely super-assassin-like decided to come knocking —"

Their heads both snapped towards the compartment doors when they heard the knock. Well, the highly urgent hammering-on-door-about-to-kick-it-in-type of "knock". Jeez, was Roy using his foot? Felicity sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. "—aaand that would be it."

Oliver was already sliding out of bed and reaching for his clothes, while Felicity, a part of her still very disgruntled about moving away from what they'd been doing, rolled over to grope for her clothes, scattered in various locations around the bed and the floor in its immediate proximity.

The sweat on her body was already making her feel chilled, even as she watched Oliver dress quickly and silently, surprisingly concentrated on what he was doing. Felicity's knees still felt like they wouldn't bear weight for a week.

"We still don't have the blood sample results from Star Labs," she said, as she slipped her arms into Oliver's now-crumpled shirt and wriggled back into her pajama bottoms, resolving to change into something less telling if they had the time — before the super assassins (hopefully Nyssa) came knocking.

Oliver glanced up, his discarded shirt in his hands. "A blood sample can't take that long, can it?"

"I know Dig only asked for a run-down, but I asked Caitlin to formulate a test inoculation. If she gets it, she'll be sending Barry over with the results."

"You didn't tell me —" Oliver's head disappeared briefly before it re-emerged from the neck of his shirt, and his expression was thunderous. "— that you asked for Star Labs' help."

Whoa. Felicity knew Oliver didn't play well with others, but that was a bit of an overreaction.
Especially since she was 99.8% sure that Team Arrow had not come up with a plan beyond the *Make Nice With Nyssa and Defeat Ra's al Ghul* part, what with the destruction of ARGUS and all.

Unfortunately, she also knew that he had a tendency for being very — very — stubborn when things spun out of control, and she couldn’t have him butting heads with his own team in front of Nyssa.

"Just out of curiosity —" she asked, stumbling out of the tangle of sheets and blankets dominating the bed space, "— did we have a plan I ruined? Because I'll apologize if we did."

Oliver gave her a look in lieu of an answer, and reached for his bow.

Felicity smiled at him, right again. "Exactly."

Chapter End Notes

I like fluffy moments (does this count as fluff) mixed with plot. Draw your own conclusions as to what they were doing before the alarm went off, I suppose ;)

When I was writing Chapter 63 I was listening to Shake it Out and Dog Days are Over by Florence + Machine — in case anyone wants a reading playlist. I guess. Oo, In My Veins by Andrew Belle makes frequent appearances too. Secrets by OneRepublic.
Sunlight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One super assassin.

One vigilante-ex-super-assassin.

One trainee vigilante.

One secret government agent.

One ex-soldier.

One hacker with Wi-Fi.

Felicity couldn't help but wonder if most superhero teams could boast the kind of roster they had. Unfortunately, she also had to wonder just which member of the team was more likely to fire the first shot — and Roy was looking like the likely winner.

So far, the plan — Nyssa's brainchild, mostly — was going pretty well, acceptance-wise. No overt nuclear-level disagreements, just a few minor issues, here and there. There was just the simple problem of getting all the parts together. Namely, the part that ensured all of them weren't going straight into a bear-trap-slash-gas-chamber. The immunization Star Labs was working on (hopefully) and the actual Dealing With Ra's al Ghul Part.

"And this — Yamashiro — he is trustworthy?" Nyssa asked, after Felicity had repeated all she knew about the Lazarus Pit and how Tatsu still died after being brought back using its powers.

A good question, and one that arose because Felicity hadn't brought up the part about Yamashiro doing the killing, causing his wife's death for the second time. For Oliver's sake — it would hurt more knowing what happened to his friends, the pain of imagining one of his friends killing the other.

Oliver looked at Felicity, a long, level stare. She nodded, just a little.

"I trust him," Oliver said, directed at Nyssa. "He was — is — my friend."

Nyssa raised an eyebrow like she thought very little about Oliver's friendships. "Immortal or not, my father's plans have not changed," she said, in a voice like dark honey. "Oliver will have to turn himself over or the city will pay."

"Define pay," said Diggle, with a glance at Oliver.

"The League's justice has never been merciful. Long, long ago, if a crime had been committed in the village, the League would slaughter fifty villagers at random — every day, until the true culprit made himself known." Nyssa casually twirled a knife in her hand, as if the gory history of the League wasn't remotely unsavory to her. "Needless to say, the League has not changed its methods. ARGUS was just the beginning. My father may drink from his river of blood for now, but he will soon thirst for more."

Oliver shook his head, his expression dark. "And we don't have the cure yet."
Felicity felt all eyes on her, as though they were expecting her to pull the cure out of the screen. She turned back to the computers, feeling her ponytail sweep across the back of her neck as she did (ponytail was work mode, and thank God she wasn't in her pajamas anymore). The message from Caitlin was cautiously optimistic — and sleep-deprived. "I can keep chasing Star Labs for it, but Caitlin — as of ten minutes ago — is still working on it."

She swiveled back to the others, repeating what they already knew. "We can't go into the bunker without being immunized. The average dose — and this is on a physically primed twenty-year-old with high cholesterol, by the way — lasts six hours. I don't think super assassins are going to let anyone sleep it off before they go stabby-stab."

"Which brings us back to the main point — Ra's al Ghul won't change his plans," said Lyla, who'd been quiet until then — analyzing, weighing what she knew about Nyssa against what fragile trust she had for the Demon's daughter. Felicity kept forgetting that the last time Lyla had seen Nyssa, it'd been in the Foundry, with Slade's army wrecking havoc on the city above — and she'd had a gun trained on Nyssa's head.

They really needed to do some trust exercises.

"And what do you suggest?" Nyssa asked, with an edge of condescension. "Surely not another drone strike on the building."

Lyla remained relatively unfazed by Nyssa's transparent dislike for her and the ARGUS association. "No," she said, crossing her arms. "Misinformation. We're on the defensive now — I say we create false rumors. Felicity can hack into internet forums and create false sightings of the Arrow outside Starling, making sure the rumors are rampant enough that major news websites pick it up — that way Nyssa doesn't have to compromise herself by feeding her father false information."

"That might bring the League to those cities instead," Oliver said, quickly, "we can't do that."

"Ra's al Ghul won't just up and leave at a rumor," Lyla said. "But he'll be cautious. Send out scouts. Delay until he knows more — which is what we want." She looked at Felicity. "Until Star Labs comes through."

"On it." Felicity said, starting to type. Internet forum weirdos and Nerd Rage was a language she was fluent in.

"I cannot make promises," Nyssa said, flatly. "My father cannot be quantified or analyzed — as I'm sure you've learned from the fate that befell Amanda Waller."

Lyla sidestepped the blade thrust, her expression guarded. "I think we all have to prepare for a shock. Starling's had two terrorist attacks in the last five years, and it's about to have a third. If the rumors fail — we have to expect bodies to drop." She looked at Oliver, as if an understanding passed between them. "I'm sorry."

Very cheerful. But Lyla had said what everyone was nervously waiting for. The League wouldn't be in Starling City without a body count, as much as they tried to fight it.

"We should do something — warn somebody —" said Roy, his fists clenched the table in frustration. "I'm not the only one remembering the death toll from last time, am I? We have the advance warning — we need to do something."

"I understand how you feel, Roy, but who are they going to believe?" Oliver asked, pragmatic as always. "The Arrow could make a call to Captain Lance, and Laurel could try to lend some
credibility to the situation — but one police Captain and an ADA aren't going to make much of a dent in a city like Starling."

"Certainly not an ex-billionaire like Oliver Queen," Diggle added, equally practical.

*Ex-billionaire.*

*Billionaire.*

Oh God. Felicity winced as a thought jumped into her head, one that even she didn't like, especially given the history with the rest of the group.

"You're not going to like this," said Felicity, *heavily* understating the point, "but there is someone else."

She — accidentally — looked right at Oliver. *Click.*

"Ray Palmer," Oliver said, as if he'd alighted on the same thought. "Business elite. Trusted by the city. If he held a press conference —"

"You mean, like your mom did when she announced the Undertaking to Starling City?" Roy said, without malice. "He might get some people moving — fundraiser bigwigs and bank vault assets — but it won't be the people who need saving the most." Roy's face was blanched. "We can't abandon the Glades again, Oliver."

Felicity massaged her temples, as the arguments and counter-arguments ran full-pelt inside their head. Warn Starling — but who would believe them? Start a mass panic — but how would that help? Get a trusted CEO to announce that the city was about to be destroyed — ring any bells? Moira Queen tried that — people did listen — but she ended up on trial for her life.

A city attacked twice by terrorists wasn't going to shut down because a few people — with very secret nighttime habits — warned them to. And there was always the chance that the government was going to make Starling City a battleground, make a statement of anti-terrorism or something shortsightedly symbolic, whether the people in it wanted their homes to become the trenches or not.

"Our only option is to delay Ra's," said Lyla, voicing the common conclusion.

Nyssa pushed her knife back into its sheath with a sound that made Felicity wince. "I would protest about wasted time and lost lives, but my conscience lacks the fragility of yours. We move when this *cure* arrives from Central City, bodies or no bodies."

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Starling City was rarely ever sunny, and in some perverse form of irony, it was today. Oliver felt the steel at the back of his chair, digging into his spine as he tried to look relaxed, to pretend that he wasn't scanning the public square in front of him for threats.

"I know this place is supposed to be premium real estate," said Felicity, typing on the new tablet computer Oliver had given her to replace the one lost in the bunker. "But should you really be able to see all the way into the windows?"

She twirled her finger in the general direction of the apartment building Thea stayed in.

"You can't," Oliver said, drumming his fingers on the table. They were sitting in an outdoor café opposite the loft, more to keep an eye on things than be voyeurs into his sister's life. Felicity also said something about a good Wi-Fi signal, when she wasn't fidgeting to get out of the stray patches of
sunlight that escaped through the overhead canopy.

"I guess asking you to set up bugs in your sister's apartment would be crossing a line," Felicity said, without looking up from her screen.

"It would," Oliver agreed.

"Which is why I asked Roy to do it," she said, unconcernedly. "Ex-boyfriends totally toe the line."

"What?"

"Kidding." Felicity glanced up and smiled at someone behind Oliver.

"One coffee black, one non-fat latte with extra sugar and a mint chocolate chip cookie," said the waitress, setting the two cups in the middle of the table. Oliver smiled tightly in response to the waitress's appraising look and kept the staged expression on his face while she lingered unnecessarily, clearing the table next to theirs.

Felicity picked up her latte with more amusement than her coffee cup could hide. "Now stop being weird and drink your coffee."

"We're not here to drink coffee —"

"Oh unclench," she said. "I've patched into the CCTV in Thea's apartment building. Anything comes in or out of the elevators, I'll know."

Oliver was caught absurdly between the two possibilities of irritation and amusement, faced with the eternally surprising Felicity Smoak. They were under the threat of invasion from the League of Assassins, but there they were, sitting in a café like two ordinary people, as if nothing was the matter.

"Don't worry. The irony of the situation has not escaped me," she said, smoothing the black-and-white skirt of her sundress. "We're having a coffee date when the whole world — by any definition — is about to go to hell."

"That's one way to put it," Oliver said mildly, reaching for his cup, a very minor part of him surprised that Felicity knew how he liked his coffee. "Are you sure about Palmer? He might really be able to do some good in this situation."

Felicity's head snapped up towards him, and she looked at him like he'd just admitted a secret desire to be a comedian. "You are not telling me to look for Ray," she said, incredulously. "Queen Consolidated — your family's company — is Palmer Technologies because of him, and because I may or may not have accidentally given him some help with deploying a remote administration tool — and let's not forget that I'm supposed to be on a one-month sabbatical. Vice-Presidents of companies like Palmer Technologies don't take one-month vacations. If he sees me again, I am so fired."

"I doubt that," Oliver said, emphatically. "He'd be a fool not to see what you have to offer."

"A weird work schedule, dubious excuses and unfiltered small talk?" she said, rolling her eyes as she typed. "Hold the phone while I put that into my CV."

Oliver leaned forward, his elbows on the table. His feelings about Palmer were mixed at best, bordering on dislike because of personal reasons. But he did know that he tended to have a blind spot when it came to people he cared about. So he wanted to make sure that he wasn't going to cost Starling City because of something as petty as jealousy.
"Felicity," he said, slowly, "if Palmer can help save Starling City, we need him. Don't rule him out on my account."

Felicity snapped her computer shut. "You lovable dummy. Though I'm pretty psyched about how okay you are about forgoing your usual stubbornness, I thought we established that a) there is nothing — repeat — nothing, between me and Ray — and that b) there's no point in having one of the richest CEOs in the world start a mass panic that only the top 1% would have the assets to avoid."

She was leaning across the table as well, almost meeting him in the middle. A stare that made it clear how serious she was about her decision. Oliver's eyes traced an invisible path down her face to her lips. A distraction — but not an entirely unwelcome one.

"If you're sure," he said, barely above a whisper. It didn't need to be any louder.

She tilted her face up, just a little. "I'm sure."

Oliver tasted sugared coffee on her lips and felt the warmth of the sun on her skin when they kissed — surprisingly easy and astonishingly sweet, as if they were a regular couple in the daylight, as if there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to fear. Felicity smiled against his mouth and kissed him one more time before she pulled away.

"Be right back," she said, sliding out of her chair.

Oliver watched her walk inside the café, pausing at the threshold to look over her shoulder — as if she could sense his gaze. Patches of white sunlight gilded her hair, dappled her face and shoulders, made her look like something quite extraordinary. When she smiled, a smile only for him, he felt something tug at his insides, like she had a true and alchemic hold on him. She had — as he'd realized a long time ago — the ability to harness something as incorporeal as light into someone truly remarkable. Felicity Smoak carried the light with her, wherever she went, and Oliver was just beginning to realize that he would always answer its call.

He leaned back in his chair and reached for his coffee again, still marveling at the coincidences in the universe — how he'd encountered someone like her in a city of nearly three million people — when someone pulled up her empty chair.

"Excuse me —" Oliver began…and trailed off into stunned silence.

"Hello, Oliver," said Ra's al Ghul. Wearing an immaculate black business suit and surrounded by a quintessential scene of urban mundanity, Oliver almost didn't recognize him. But he would have known those eyes anywhere — eyes almost completely swallowed by black — now leveling a darkly challenging stare at Oliver.

Ra's rested a hand on the back of Felicity's vacated chair. "May I join you?" he asked.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-DUUUUUUUN. Will try to update during the week. Stay strong until hiatus ends — we're so close. :)
Noose

Chapter Notes

Hey there :) Sorry to leave you guys with the cliffhanger, but as you can see, I'm back with two new chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ground beneath Oliver's feet shook, fissures yawning across the foundation he once thought was steady bedrock. The foolish assumption that Ra's al Ghul would never walk in the sunlight. That Ra's al Ghul would never — never — walk among the innocents in Starling City.

"You look surprised," Ra's said, tilting his head to the side in calculating appraisal, at ease in his seat across the table. "Did you truly think I wouldn't find you?"

Oliver said nothing, his eyes narrowed. The possibilities were running rampant in his brain. Either he'd been followed, or Nyssa had been — exposing their alliance and consequently the plan. There was no other explanation for why Ra's was sitting opposite him, why Ra's had come personally to threaten him.

As if he could sense Oliver's thoughts, the corner of Ra's' mouth twitched upward in a cold smile, and he turned his head towards the city square, ablaze with sunlight. "You were my protégé for the past year, one of the few initiates I took the trouble to personally train. Did you truly think I would not know your deepest fears and your darkest thoughts?"

Oliver carefully schooled his expression into practiced indifference, away from the very real possibility that Thea was in danger because Ra's knew that he was watching out for his sister, and the increasing risk that Ra's was going to see Felicity for who she was, and what she truly meant to Oliver.

By angering Ra's, Oliver could force his attention back to him, away from the people who mattered.

"Your calculations were operating on a flawed premise," Oliver said, intentionally curt. "What with the fact that I'm here, and not in Nanda Parbat."

Ra's made a sound of amusement, not taking the bait. "Perhaps," he agreed. "Perhaps I underestimated your foolhardy tendencies. But I have never underestimated your simplistic instinct to protect — your only surviving family, for instance."

Oliver stiffened, but Ra's continued as if he hadn't seen the rigidity of Oliver's posture — an instinctive response to the mention of his family.

"A tragedy, really. Your family dwells in the next life — all except for your half-sister. Malcolm's child — as I understand it."

Ra's inhaled deeply as if he was enjoying the fresh air, when Oliver knew he was letting the threat sink in, the threat against Thea. He took one look at Oliver's face and smiled. "Your priorities when it comes to your family are remarkably simple. Your sister is your only remaining family, and needless to say she is your Achilles Heel. Sever all ties, Oliver, or they will become the noose that
tightens around your throat."

Oliver’s hands, hidden beneath the table, inched towards his pocket, where there was a collection of sharpened flechettes — steel darts with razor edges, capable of severing nerves — arteries, if necessary. Two and a half seconds. That was all he needed to end Ra's al Ghul, right then and there.

"You could try," Ra's agreed, congenially. "But there are a dozen ways I could end your existence before you draw your weapon."

In spite of himself, Oliver felt a cold smile take over his features, one that promised retribution. If it'd been eight years ago — during his first days on the island — he would have believed it. Yao Fei and Slade had taught him as much. But he'd survived those five years, two as the vigilante, and one in the city of assassins. He'd done the unthinkable and lived through the unthinkable — and Ra's would be a fool to overlook that.

"You underestimate my training," he said, simply.

Ra's twisted a heavy gold ring on his thumb, as if in deep thought, the pure black stone absorbing the sunlight like a void. "I see a boy, trying to be man. A student who thinks he can challenge his master." He sighed, as if Oliver had gravely disappointed him. "I could have killed you one year ago. Why do you think I spared your life — took you into the League?"

"You wanted to make a point." Oliver had thought about this long and hard, during his year in Nanda Parbat. Why Ra's stayed his hand, why he'd taken Oliver in as a student instead of a prisoner — though at times the line blurred. "You wanted to strip my humanity from me, turn me back into the Hood."

Ra's made a noise of amusement. "I do prefer the Hood over your Arrow persona. The harbinger of dark justice is a neater, more expedient symbol for the kind of justice the League deems fair. Your first days as the Hood were a beautiful thing, Oliver. You killed with a sense of righteousness, unburdened by the self-deluding concerns of subjective morality or false excuses — you killed because it was just."

Oliver shook his head, an automatic rejection of the Hood. Because of Tommy. Tommy despised what the Hood stood for — judge, jury, executioner. Honoring him was to become the Arrow. "It was warped justice," he said, his voice edged with the broken shards of his best friend's death, "and I've done my best to atone for it."

"You feared the darkness inside of you only because the friends you surrounded yourself with deemed it frightening. They clouded your judgment, made you doubt your own instincts. I showed you a path back to that truer form of justice. Do you see, Oliver? I took you in to save your city. The Hood is what Starling City needs — a fearsome symbol, striking terror into the hearts of the unworthy and the corrupt. You turned your back on your crusade and harmed your city, but the League — I — can return you to the path of true justice."

There was a terrible power in Ra's' words, as seductive as the sleep of death, a siren call through the mist, painting a picture of the justice Oliver had once foreseen in his city — the necessary baptism of blood for his city to revert to what it once was.

*Has it ever occurred to you that you could do some real good in this city?*

*Maybe there's another way.*

*But I do know two things. You are not alone — and I believe in you.*
Oliver heard her words — heard the pang they set off in his conscience, the light that cleaved through the dark allure of Ra's' twisted logic, and knew, remembered, what it was to honor Starling City with the right kind of justice. What it meant to not fight broken, to not break off parts of his soul with every life he took as the Hood.

"No," Oliver said. "No. I left the Hood behind because I realized that Starling deserved better. If I let my rage dispense justice — then I'd be no better than a tyrant, no better than the terrors I was trying to fight. It was a way to cleanse my city, but it wasn't the right way — and the darkness would have consumed me. No — humanity, conscience — that is the symbol that Starling deserves, and I'll fight my hardest to be that symbol. Whatever it takes."

"Brave words, but think carefully, Oliver Queen. The League does not ask twice," Ra's said, resting a clenched fist on the table. "Any chance at clemency expired when you slunk away like a thief in the night — after what your brethren have done for you — after all I have done for you."

"All you have done for me?" Oliver repeated, leaning forward in his chair. He was beginning to see where Malcolm had adopted his unique brand of convoluted self-justifications — from the Demon's Head himself. "You threw me in a pit, every day since I came to Nanda Parbat — you cast me into darkness and left me to fight for my sanity." Oliver shook his head, as if he could banish the ghoulish faces of his loved ones, stolen and warped by the pit's twisted darkness. "You handed me a blade and ordered me to murder my own humanity — and if you truly thought I would — then you never really understood me at all. You never understood what makes me strong." Oliver's words bit, as they were meant to.

Ra's' eyes flashed, as if he was well and truly angered. "Don't I?" he said, slowly. "I took you in — a weak, soft, boy. What you fail to comprehend — time and time again — is that in order to save this city, you must do what is truly necessary — because in order to fight the darkness, you must become shadow and master it from within. You must plunge your hands into the cesspool of filth and corruption, baptize yourself in the blood of those that would harm your city. That is the lesson you will never learn, Oliver, that everything requires sacrifice."

"Not this," Oliver said, vehemently. "I know what true sacrifices are — and I will make them — but any sacrifice I make will not be at the expense of my humanity. You can't win, Ra's. Not on this."

"You are a boy, and a fool." Ra's smiled, as cold a smile as death's scythe. "You think this is a game, that I care about a win or a loss. You are mistaken. I care about justice, and it will be your head at my feet — taken by my blade, after I have made you suffer for the destruction of my home."

Oliver should have felt terror at Ra's' words, and the boy in him — the one Slade Wilson called kid on the island — would have feared Ra's. But he just saw him for who he was — a psychopath who needed to be stopped. By threatening his city, his sister, Ra's had given him the final reason.

"I'm not a member of the League," said Oliver. "I was never a real member of the League."

Ra's opened the fist he'd rested on the table, showing Oliver the four crescent-shaped gouges in his weathered palm, dark crimson welling up in the raw skin. "A blood oath," he said, nonchalant to the wounds. "If you recall, you opened your veins and made a promise in blood, sworn in service of the League, and you will be released when I deem it so."

"And if I break that oath?" Oliver asked, already aware of the answer.

"No quarter. No mercy," Ra's said, rising from his chair. "Not this time."

– "Oh."
Oliver shut his eyes at the familiar voice, at the sinking feeling of time used up, at the moment of pure terror that his worst nightmare had come to pass.

Ra's wasn't looking at Oliver, not anymore. Behind Oliver, Felicity looked from him to Ra's, her mouth slightly open in surprise. In some form of cruel irony, the sun shone directly on her skin, illuminating the halo of flyaway gold around her head, the glow inside her skin, the midday-blue of her eyes.

"Who is this?" Ra's asked with a smile.

Thank God she understood.

Felicity took a step back. "Sorry," she said, her voice brittle with feigned nonchalance. "I must have the wrong table — excuse me —" Her skirt swirled out behind her as she spun around to go.

Only Oliver saw Ra's move, with the dangerous strike of a coiled serpent. Felicity gasped involuntarily when his fingers closed around her wrist, twisting her towards him in an effortless iron grip.

Oliver was dimly aware that he was already on his feet, a hidden dart clutched in his hand. Felicity's face was white from the strain of trying to get away — the muscles taut in her exposed arm — but Ra's had her, and Oliver knew he was strong enough to break her wrist if he wanted.

There should have been some calculation on Oliver's part, some kind of pretense that he didn't know Felicity, that she was just a stranger with the wrong table — but all of the logic went out of his head the moment Ra's touched her. The moment the man he saw as a personification of corruption and warped darkness touched the woman he saw as his light.

And it was going to cost them. Ra's black eyes went slowly, appraisingly, from Felicity — who was still fighting his grip — to Oliver.

"I see," Ra's said, laconically.

Oliver tightened his grip on the dart. "It's not her fight," he said, through gritted teeth.

The people in the café were just starting to stare when Ra's released Felicity with a dispassionate grace. She stumbled out of his reach, fingermarks showing livid red against her pale skin. In a rush of protective instinct, Oliver was already stepping between her and Ra's, screening her from view with his body. One arm was thrust behind his back, as though to gather her close to him, and her shaking hand slipped into his, unseen but holding on tight.

"Oliver Queen," said Ra's, wiping his hands on his sleeve as if he'd touched something unclean, "you have forty-eight hours to present yourself to the League. Or history shall repeat itself."

"What history?" Oliver asked, his voice tight with suppressed rage.

Instantly, he knew he'd asked the wrong question. Ra's' features twisted in savage mockery as he reached into the folds of his jacket and tossed something out into the city square. It was a deliberate gesture, staged to be eye-catching — a flicker of metal flying out of his hand, nothing more.

Until —

In the corner of his eye he saw someone fall abruptly, like a doll with its strings cut. A shrill cry of shock — from a stranger frozen at the sight of a dead body.
"Oh my God," said Felicity, as blood pooled beneath the corpse from a hidden wound.

Before he could react, a wave of trepidation swept along the crowd behind them, a rush of something primal. Then, screams started to echo through the square, a high, instinctive response of terror, as synchronized as a flock of dark birds taking wing.

Oliver turned his head to the city square, and watched — immobile with powerless horror as corpses — their arms and legs spread loose and wide like straw dolls — plummeted from nooses across skyscrapers all over Starling City.

The first death had been a cue, and this was the curtain pulling apart to reveal the tableau, all of Ra's al Ghul's making.

"Oliver —" Felicity gripped his arm with shaking fingers. "He's gone. Ra's — he's gone."

Chapter End Notes

I felt like Oliver and Ra's needed a mini-showdown of their own. This was hard to draft, but I wanted to show the differences between the two of them, why Ra's wanted Oliver in the League in the first place (don't think I ever really explained it). Anyways, hope you enjoyed it :)

"Good God," said Diggle, watching the screen with an expression of helpless dismay.

Lyla pulled her hair off her face and held it there, her hands very still. "We said the bodies would drop," she said, in a low voice. "Goddammit." She slammed her fist into the steel table in a rare show of volatility, but who could blame her?

Roy was in the background, punching one of the sandbags like he was trying to give it broken ribs.

Felicity had to look away from the screens. She couldn't watch it again — clip after clip, the horrified news channels all reporting the same thing — that there'd been a third terror attack on Starling City. The bodies, pictured in grainy footage taken from hundreds of cellphone cameras, spinning to their second deaths like marionettes dancing a grotesque performance at the hand of their puppeteer.

She started suddenly, realizing that she was still on the phone with Caitlin, who'd called minutes after the story broke.

"Thank you, Caitlin," said Felicity, silently berating herself for losing focus. "I can't tell you how much we need this right now."

Caitlin's answer was garbled from static and bad cell service. "Sorry, Felicity, we sent Barry ahead with the cure but me and Cisco couldn't get a train out. Starling Central's completely shut down, but I promise we're driving right n— Cisco-don't-take-that-exit!"

Felicity jumped at the screech of tires, almost dropping the phone. "No — Caitlin — you guys don't have to —"

"Felicity, we're coming. Barry couldn't stay in Central City — not with what's going on — and neither can we." Caitlin sounded breathless on the other end, as if she'd just had a panic attack. But Felicity could imagine her smiling when she said the next part: "So don't try and stop us, okay?"

In spite of herself, Felicity had to smile. "Okay. Be safe, you guys."

"See you in a bit." Caitlin hung up in a crackle of static, and Felicity returned the phone to the tabletop.

"News?" Oliver said, hovering at the opposite end of the worktable. Diggle and Lyla had turned to look at her, Roy momentarily distracted from his sandbag-abuse.

"Barry's en-route. He'll be here within the hour." Felicity nodded, as if she could be sure that it was good news.

There was work to do. She carefully scraped the flecks of dried blood from her wrist with a file, emptying the flakes into a glass evidence jar. There were four distinct smudges across her skin, because Ra's had been bleeding when he touched her. The hallowed blood sample they'd been gunning for — everything coming up Team Arrow.

Oh wait, except for the mass hysteria and hundreds of dead ARGUS agents hanging across Starling. Her right wrist was the one he'd grabbed — with inhuman strength — if she was going to be
completely and terrifyingly frank. As if to prove that she hadn't imagined it, accompanying the bloodstains were rapidly-forming bruises in the general impression of a palm, clamping down on her skin and bone with vice-like force.

Her hands were shaking so much that she kept missing the bulk of it.

"Frack," she muttered, after she missed for the third time.

Oliver was suddenly at her side, taking the file from her left hand. "Here," he said, bending to help her. "I'll do it."

Felicity didn't say anything, but watched as he steadied her arm and finished the blood collection, scraping lightly until the glass jar was full of rust-like flakes, and Felicity's wrist was just plain cherry-red and inflamed with welts.

Oliver silently capped the evidence jar and held an ice pack to her skin. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have guessed that he — that Ra's knew me well enough to anticipate I'd keep an eye on Thea."

"She's your sister, Oliver. I'd rather he be right than you turn out to be the kind of big brother who keeps away from his own sister." Felicity leaned against the table, meeting his eyes with a frank stare of her own. "Any word from Nyssa?" she asked.

Oliver shook his head. "She may be out on assignment. I'm guessing what the League did was a strain on their manpower."

Felicity glanced involuntarily at the screens again and immediately regretted it, when she saw the blood-suffused face of a hanging ARGUS agent and saw the spurt of arterial blood flying across her front — the imagined taste of it in her mouth, like acrid pennies.

Nausea made her vision swim, and she had to turn back to the table, breathing deeply through her nose. "The bodies," she said, softly. "He used them like ornaments — like they're nothing but toys —" Her voice broke, cracking like ice strained too thin, and she had to cover her mouth to stifle the sound.

Oliver's arms closed around her, his body surrounding hers with solid warmth. Triggered memories of falling asleep with him, lying heart to heart in their shared safe space. Felicity shut her eyes and pressed her forehead into his shoulder, inhaling his scent like it would drive away the dark thoughts inside her mind.

"I'm here," he murmured, into her hair. "It's all right."

"Guess the cat's out of the bag," she said, into his chest. "Ra's knew, didn't he?"

She didn't need to specify what Ra's knew, and Oliver sighed in lieu of an answer. "He could tell — of course he could."

"Because we're both such bad liars." Inappropriate humor, tugging the corners of her mouth into a painful smile she didn't feel.

"I won't let anything happen to you, Felicity," he said, pressing a kiss into her hair. "I promise."

Felicity's grip — fists in his shirt — tightened.

"We have to stop Ra's al Ghul," she said, feeling her anger start to rise, hot as a ball of lead inside her
chest. "He crossed a line today when he dishonored the dead. We are going to bring Ra's to his knees, and you're going to make sure he never fights another war again."

"Felicity —" Oliver's tone was intended to soothe, but it just made her angrier.

"No," she said, tearing herself from him. Her ponytail swung madly, slapping the side of her face as she spun away. Her feelings were starting to spill over, anger directed at Ra's al Ghul about to be targeted mistakenly at her friends instead…and she had to clear her head. "Don't. I know what he did to you and it was cruel — inhuman and evil and cruel, but this —" She pointed towards the screen, tears burning in her eyes. "This — this is unforgivable. We're going to shut him down, and we're going to do it soon."

Without another word, she stalked over to the computers, pulling the keyboards out and starting — furiously — to type. She swiped her hand across her cheek, brushing away the furious tears that were spilling over, her mind laser-focused on the job.

They needed Nyssa, because they were going to fight a war.

"Well done, daughter," said Ra's, materializing behind Nyssa like a specter of shadow.

Nyssa let a smile curl across her lips, a smile edged with cruel pleasure — as if she'd felt the fierce vindication her father must have felt when the bodies of his enemies danced the hangman's waltz.

Ra's joined his daughter at the ledge overlooking the harbor, streaked with the blood-red tinge of a dying sun. Beauty Sara must have appreciated, preserved in memories of her home, destroyed and corrupted now by her father's savagery. They stood in silence, the salty wind tugging gently at their black robes like the wings of dark birds.

"It will bring the traitor to his knees," Nyssa said, and it was the truth, one she deeply regretted. "Oliver Queen feels most keenly the wounds that are not his — sees most vividly the blood shed on his behalf. It was a wise move, father, if I may be so bold."

"You understand me best, daughter." Ra's inhaled, deeply. "You understand how I wish traitors to suffer, how unforgivable treachery is to me. I raised Oliver Queen from the depths of ignorance, I opened his eyes and taught him to see — and how does he repay me? With ash and stubbornness and betrayal."

"Oliver Queen will kneel at your feet and you will relieve him of his head the way you relieved the woman of hers." Nyssa bowed her head to hide the traitorous glitter in her black eyes — her father's eyes. "Of that, I have no doubt."

"Generous words. I must confess, it is heartening to know that my flesh-and-blood daughter still believes in my judgment. After all," Ra's said, nonchalantly, "Oliver Queen was to be promised to you in marriage. You were to bear heirs for the Demon's dynasty — heirs that would have been half-Queen by blood."

Nyssa felt her facade crack, just a little, at the mention of the depraved marriage her father proposed. "Any slight I felt was because of Oliver Queen's disregard for you, father. I have no personal attachment to the marriage."

"Oh, of that I have no doubt," Ra's said, turning towards his daughter. "Your heart is broken in two — and I know that half rests in Ta-er al-Sahfer's cold grave. She lies buried in Starling, no?"

Nyssa's fury simmered, hidden, at her father's casual mention of Sara, the love of his daughter's life.
— the love he discarded without regard to his daughter's soul, all because she was an inconvenience to his plans for an heir.

"She does, father. Ta-er al-Sahfer had my heart," she lied, feeling the fragments of it shatter all over again, as she dishonored Sara's memory with lies about her love. "But it was a dalliance. Nothing more."

A smile crossed her father's face, a smile she recognized as a mirror to her own — the smile as sharp as daggers, intended to hurt the one at which it was directed.

"You will never learn, Nyssa," he said, turning his back and leaving her standing alone on the ledge, overlooking the rippling water. "You will never learn that love is a greater evil than fear. Fear returns us to our higher form of clarity — it sharpens our focus into the simple divide between what matters, and what is merely superfluous. Love clouds that judgment and makes it impossible to see the greater good. Do you understand, daughter, what I am trying to teach you?"

Nyssa felt the acid rise in her throat, and for a moment she saw herself from afar, spinning around with her bow in her hand and an arrow trained on her father's heart. Firing — firing — until she tore his black heart into shreds, destroying his toxic presence for what he dared to say about Sara, about a love he would never — in his void of a soul — understand.

But she remembered in biting clarity what she would do for Sara. What she would do for the light she'd lost.

"Yes father," she said, "I understand."

"I don't think you do."

Behind her came the sound of a drawn blade. With the reflexes born of the League's training, Nyssa grasped her sword and spun —

— too late.

She was paralyzed by the sensation of a sword piercing her chest where it showed above her armor. As if in cruel irony, she saw the obsidian-black blade of her father's sword sink into her chest before she even felt the pain.

The blade was impossibly cold, leaching the living warmth from her skin, as if it would claim her life just by touch alone.

With a tenderness she had never seen her father show, he touched the back of her head with a gentle hand, running his hand through her black curls, as if he was merely giving her a blessing.

He was.

"Forgive and have mercy on her, excuse her and pardon her, protect her from the punishment of the grave and the torment of fire," he murmured, as soft as a prayer, all the while resting his hand at the back of her head in a loving caress, his words failing to bring any warmth to his soulless eyes.

Nyssa's lips parted with the taste of blood bubbling up in her throat, bitter with the shock and disbelief that her father was going to kill her. The dawning realization that she was going to fall to her death, just like Sara did.

Gently, kindly, her father's hand slid downward, to the back of her neck. With an iron grip he forced his daughter closer, drove the blade deeper into her body. Gasping, Nyssa thought she would black
out from the agony, the more the blade grated against bone and flesh. She had endured pain before, her father's training a source of that pain, but this was a wound she had never felt before — a mortal one. Suddenly, the blade stopped, because she and her father were heart to heart, his mouth near her ear, as perversely intimate as a lover.

"Love has clouded your judgment, daughter mine," her father whispered. "I have said, time and time again, that Ta-er al-Sahfer made you weak, that your inexplicable love for a mundane woman made you less than the Demon's Heir. Your mother was an exceptional being, and your brazen association with Ta-er al-Sahfer only dishonored her memory. Yet, your love for her has persisted beyond the grave, and it still weakens you. It made you foolish — foolish enough to think that I would condone your consorting with Oliver Queen in a misguided attempt to destroy me."

Nyssa felt a dribble of blood on her lips, felt the mortality of her expiring breaths. And above all, an inexplicable sense of numbing calm. "It was —" she said, with labored slowness, "it was love. And if death reunites me with Ta-er al-Sahfer, then I have no regrets. You fear love, father, and you tried to punish me for it — but you only help me remember." She grasped her father's shoulders, pulling close to rasp, "Remember, father, that you killed me for love — and in doing so, reunited me with mine."

Her teeth bared in a final smile, Nyssa pushed away from her father, her flesh sliding easily across the slick blade — slick with her blood — until her foot slid out over nothing. The ledge dropped smoothly out of sight, her body sinking through the air like a stone. As her body arched in a graceful curve, in her last and only fall, Nyssa saw a fiery blaze of light across the water — the inferno of a firebird rising from the ashes, streaking towards her. It was Nyssa al Ghul's last thought, before her eyes closed and she fell, ready to join Sara in the next life.

Chapter End Notes

Ooch, Ra's really is burning through the bodies.

Sorry for another cliffhanger but it's past midnight and I have early classes tomorrow. Until the next update, cheers!
Oliver dodged Roy's strike and whipped him straight off his feet. Roy landed with a groan, one of his staffs rolling off into the dark.

"You okay?" Oliver asked, offering Roy a helping hand.

"Well I'm obviously distracted," Roy muttered, rubbing the back of his head as he stood. "But why aren't you? The whole city's going to hell —"

"Barry — I don't have paperweights!" Felicity shouted, as a blur of red-and-gold lightning zipped past her, throwing up loose sheets of paper like it was the last day of high school.

Roy sighed heavily. "—and then there's that. The human lightning bolt."

Barry had returned from the train compartment with a box, depositing a pile of unused syringes in front of Felicity with a grin. Oliver suppressed the usual twinge of annoyance that was his instinctive response to Barry's carefree attitude, schooling his expression into placid inscrutability when Felicity looked over to him and Roy.

She had a syringe in one hand, a Star Labs vial in the other.

"Any volunteers?" she asked.

"Remind me what's in it again?" Diggle asked, holding one of the vials up to the light. Beside him, Roy was doing the same, albeit with a lot more dubiousness than anyone at the table.

Felicity exchanged glances with Lyla from opposite sides of the table. Ever since Barry had saved her life by rushing her to Starling General, she and Diggle had nurtured a mutual soft spot for him — and who wouldn't, really, with his puppy-dog eyes and adorable nerd-vibe — but they still looked wary nonetheless.

"Are we sure it turned out right?" Lyla asked, cautiously.

"I know it looks — weird —" said Barry, holding up his hands in a don't-shoot-the-messenger way, "but Caitlin guarantees it's going to immunize you."

"Barry." Oliver looked up from the STAR Labs briefcase of identical glass vials. "It's black."

Felicity touched Barry's arm protectively. "Hey, you guys were complaining about secret formulas being colored. And black technically isn't a color. So this is a good thing — variety, changing it up, whatever clichés you can think of."

Oliver narrowed his eyes. "Felicity, that was you."

Oh right.

"Anyway," she said, hastily, "in defense of Barry and Caitlin and Cisco — they're the science guys. I trust them."
She shot a silent *what?* in response to the look Oliver gave her. They were all one step from ganging up on Barry, who — in all fairness, was *not* the guy they went to for the hard science, but the guy they went to for the imaginative, if slightly far-fetched theories. So, in conclusion, she didn't like it very much either.

But it wasn't as if they had a choice, and they all knew it.

"Fine — I'll be the lab rat," Felicity said, about to dramatically roll up her sleeve before she realized that she was wearing a) a dress, and b) said dress had no sleeves. Everyone totally noticed. Anyway, powering through. "But full disclosure — I hate needles, so someone's going to have to distract m —"

"Felicity," said Oliver, looking over her shoulder at the computers. She spun around. The screen was blinking with alerts — because the facial recognition program had found a match.

Felicity really wished she could lip read. It was them — for sure — but even if she hacked into a network of security cameras, it didn't mean they could pick up audio from non-existent speakers.

"It's definitely Nyssa," said Felicity, enlarging the image on the monitors. "And she's with Ra's. They're at the docks...because why not?"

Behind her, Barry asked — to no one in particular, and not very subtly — "Who's Nyssa?" Felicity briefly closed her eyes and hoped that no one — and by that she meant Roy — would strangle him. "Her father doesn't suspect her, that's what matters," said Lyla, her mind on the big picture, as always.

"They do look pretty chummy," Diggle agreed.

"She could still be at risk," Oliver said, staring intently at the screens. "Can you get audio?"

Felicity shook her head. "Unless someone has a deaf cousin we don't know about." She leaned back in her chair, looking at the others. "They look like they're just talking — bouncing terrorist ideas off each other — the whole innocuous —"

Roy swore, loudly, and Felicity's head snapped back towards the monitors.

It was like something from a cartoon — blatantly dramatic and impossible to believe — except it wasn't. Nyssa twisted around, but not enough to avoid her father's sword. Felicity gasped when it went straight through her, then deeper still.

"Barry," Oliver said. "Run."

Felicity barely felt the telltale blast of air that meant Barry had taken off, she was already typing, tracking Barry's impossible speed by GPS, hacking into the comms inside his suit, scanning the area around the docks for the nearest hospitals. Everything — using the precious seconds she had to make sure that Nyssa would survive this.

"Barry, the nearest hospital is Starling East —"

Oliver's hand gripped her shoulder. "No," he interrupted. "Barry! Bring her here."

Felicity spun around in her chair. "What are you doing?" she whispered. "We can't operate on her here."
"We can't take her to the hospital," Oliver said, equally fierce. "If Ra's had the foresight to lure his daughter into a trap so he could kill her, he'll have the foresight to make sure she doesn't survive it if she shows up at a hospital."

"Hold it. Guys," Roy said, leaning across the table. "This isn't a hospital and in case you haven't noticed — we aren't exactly operating at industry standards here. We could be doing more damage than her dad did."

"Oliver. It could kill her," Felicity said, slowly.

Oliver's grip on the table edge was taut under the strain, and his eyes were dark when he looked at Felicity. "But she'll die anyway if the League finds her in a Starling hospital."

They stared at each other — the weight of what they'd started, all on their shoulders. Going against Ra's al Ghul had been Nyssa's plan, but they were the ones who'd have to finish it. Their options were shrinking. Either she went to the nearest hospital — and risk Ra's al Ghul's spy network tracking her down — or they risked her dying on the makeshift operating table inside the secondary foundry.

Barry crackled suddenly over the comms. "Felicity — I have her! She's unconscious — I can't tell how bad it is —"

"Diggle," said Oliver, turning away abruptly. "Do we have everything we need for emergency response?"

Diggle was already behind the steel cabinets, rolling out the quartet of medical equipment. "We have the tech to set up an OR in one of the train compartments," he said, looking levelly from Oliver to Felicity. "I'm not choosing sides here, but I've never been on the table bleeding out before."

Diggle looked at Oliver then, and Felicity did too. She'd never been the subject of an emergency intervention inside the Foundry, but he had — too many times. Diggle had emergency field experience, but he wasn't a doctor like Caitlin, and Oliver had survived with Diggle holding the proverbial scalpel and Felicity's less-than-professional assistance. If anyone understood the risk they were taking, it was him.

"If Barry drops Nyssa off here first, we could get her stabilized while he gets Caitlin," Oliver said, steadily. "She helped Lyla when Harkness attacked the Foundry last year — and this time we have the tech to make sure she doesn't need a hospital."

"Is that a Barry-yes or Barry-don't? Kinda need an answer on this one!" Barry said, before dodging what sounded like a freight truck.

"Felicity," Oliver said hoarsely, sounding more helpless than she'd ever heard him before, and more than ever understood how much he needed her support to go ahead with this — with a decision of life and death they were all making — together.

Felicity turned towards the monitors and squeezed her eyes shut — only for a second. When she reopened them, she had an answer.

"Barry," she said, "get down here!"

Felicity had never felt time go by so painfully. Every second was a second that brought Nyssa closer to death, and judging from the expression on all their faces, they knew it.
Oliver was the first to spot Barry. Silently, he maneuvered around the steel worktable to stand near the entrance, his archer's eyes peering through the murky darkness.

"He's here," Oliver said, seconds before the telltale red streak lit up the dark tunnel — and the crackle of electricity fried the air around them. Felicity still jumped every time Barry exploded into being, and this time was no exception.

Except for the body in his arms.

Nyssa.

Barry was out of breath, practically hyperventilating from the panic. Felicity knew the feeling. It wasn't easy, seeing someone as close to death — even a stranger — and Nyssa looked like it. Her head hung limply over Barry's arm, her mouth streaked with droplets of red.

It was probably a bad sign.

"She's bleeding," said Barry, looking helplessly at Oliver. "I caught her just before she hit the water, but —"

"Oliver!" Roy pushed the train door aside. "We're ready."

Oliver nodded, and turned back to Barry. "I'll take her — you go get Caitlin."

"What?" Barry looked from Roy to Oliver. His face was speckled with red droplets, as if Nyssa had coughed blood in his face — and his eyes were dangerously unfocused — disoriented by new surroundings and faces he wasn't used to seeing. Shell-shocked.

Felicity stood up from behind the computers, watching him warily. Barry was only a kid. A kid who may have seen death as a boy or as a CSI, but certainly wasn't used to it the way Oliver was.

For a moment, Felicity was afraid of Oliver's instincts — Slade and Ra's al Ghul as mentors probably meant he wasn't used to the carrot versus the stick approach, but before she could yell at him to not slap Barry around the head, he did something unexpected.

"Barry —" Oliver gripped the back of his neck and shook him, firmly — blue eyes cutting into hazy green. "Concentrate. Nyssa is crucial to what's happening right now in Starling City, but she'll die without medical attention. You need to give her to me and find Caitlin. Do you understand?"

Barry nodded, slowly — because thank God he did. Felicity rushed over to them, prying Barry's hands loose so that Oliver and Roy could transfer Nyssa's weight to themselves. She nodded at them both — they rushed Nyssa inside the train — before turning back to Barry.

"Hey," she said, grasping the sides of his face, forcing him to look at her. "You can do this. Caitlin and Cisco are stuck in traffic — North Bridge, black Toyota."

There was blood on her hands from Barry's face, but she didn't care. She was looking at her friend — a hyperventilating speedster of a friend, but a friend nonetheless. Barry's eyes moved slowly across her face, the panic in them receding — and Felicity nodded. Then she smiled.

It wasn't a happy smile, but a smile that showed she understood how Barry was feeling. She understood his need to fall apart because God knew she'd had those moments, but there was work to do before he could self-detonate and put himself back together. With her help or otherwise.

"You can do it, Barry," said Felicity, with a confidence she truly felt, the I believe in you born from
gut instinct.

Barry nodded jerkily, giving her hand a final squeeze before he disengaged.

"I can do it," he repeated.

Felicity closed her eyes as the wind gusted strong around her, opening them just in time to see the last crackle of red disappear down the tunnel.

"Please," Felicity murmured, to no one at all.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for that last cliffhanger, guys.

ARRRRRGGGGGHHHHHH those promos for 3x10 really are killing me. I had to speed-write these (in between re-watching the Flarrow crossovers and the Flash episodes so I could write Barry and Caitlin and Cisco) because I just can't think of Oliver being dead — even if it's just for the time being.
"Thank God we have enough of this," said Diggle, taking the blood bag Oliver handed him. "She might be able to hold out until Caitlin gets here."

"Nyssa's trained for this all her life," Oliver said, as Diggle pressed sterile gauze over the wound and checked the oxygen mask over her face. The wound was in an odd position, high on the right side of her chest, as if Ra's' aim had been warped by her twisting to avoid it. As far as he could tell, the blood loss was too slow to be from an arterial wound — but that didn't mean the absence of internal bleeding. "She didn't have time to avoid the blade, but she probably knew how to minimize the damage."

"Let's hope so." Diggle exchanged glances with Oliver, whose hands were slick with Nyssa's blood. "I guess now you know what it's like to be us when it's you on that table," he added, in a moment of dark humor.

Oliver shook his head. "Maybe I'll start wearing Kevlar."

They all looked up when the train windows lit up fiery gold, and two people materialized suddenly in the makeshift OR. Caitlin slammed her hands into the steel table as she regained her balance, her red hair falling messily around her face from the wind. But she pushed herself upright and scraped back her hair, moving past Diggle and Oliver, her focus on the operating table.

"Nyssa? Can you hear me?" she said, dividing her attention between picking through the tray of steel instruments laid out beside her and her scrutiny of the heart monitor.

Oliver turned when he heard the door open. Felicity was frozen in the doorway, staring white-faced at Nyssa laid out on the table. Her eyes found Oliver's — registering the blood on his hands and where it'd come from — and she sucked in her breath.

"We need to keep her awake! Epinephrine —" Caitlin took the syringe Diggle handed her and jammed it into Nyssa's skin.

"Felicity!" she said, pulling on a pair of rubber gloves. "I need you to put pressure on the wound — talk to her — make sure she stays awake. Mr. Diggle, I'm going to need you to start chest compressions and stand by with the defibrillator if we need it. Everyone else —" she raised her hands, which were already covered with blood, "—I'm sorry, but we're going to need some breathing room."

Lyla grabbed Barry and started towing him — however unwillingly he let her — out of the train. Oliver nodded, but Caitlin had already turned back to Nyssa. He caught Felicity's arm as they crossed paths, gently holding her back. "Are you sure?" he asked, quietly. The others didn't know about the fears she'd told him about, under the cover of a shared darkness. "I mean — the blood…"

"Not my first time," she said, with a faint smile.

But Oliver didn't smile back. Felicity squeezed his hand, as if to say that she understood, before her fingers slid soundlessly, weightlessly through his. Oliver turned, and saw that her smile was already fading as she rushed towards the operating table.
"Oliver," Lyla said, standing at the foot of the steps with Barry. "Come on."

The heart monitor was working fine. Felicity checked, three times (about as many times Nyssa's heart had stopped during the surgery). She subsided back into an uncomfortable chair, picking up Nyssa's limp — but faintly warm — hand in her cold ones. The blood on her hands had washed off, but there was probably still some in her nails, in the deep creases of her palm — or maybe it was all just in her head. There was definitely blood on her dress — which was a goner, unless Felicity could come up with an excellent story about a spilled glass of beetroot juice for her already-suspicious dry cleaner.

"Say you had a nosebleed," said Cisco, fiddling around with the anesthesia machine. "Always works with my laundry place."

Felicity started — she didn't realize she'd been thinking out loud.

"Cisco," Caitlin said, reaching up from her chair to disengage his hands from the tech, "you don't have a laundry place."

"Yeah, but if I did, that excuse would totally work." Cisco straightened up from behind the machine, holding up two wires and grinning. "By the way — this would work so much better if it was rewired."

"Please don't electrocute yourself again," Caitlin pleaded, looking like a tired big sister with a very hyperactive toddler.

"I can't believe you have an X-ray machine," he said, digging around behind the scanner.

"Cool!"

"Cisco."

Cisco reluctantly replaced everything and started to circle the table like a guppy inside a too-small tank. "She's pretty," he said, sneaking a look at Nyssa — who in all fairness, had the Amazonian-cheekbone-Middle-Eastern-exoticism thing going for her, even lying sedated and heavily bandaged from a near-lethal stab wound.

Felicity was all for romance, but there was also the near-inevitable cleanup that would result from anyone dumb enough to try and hit on Nyssa after she'd just gotten out of a coma. Especially with her lack of patience and distinct absence of interest in the male gender.

"Trust me, Cisco," Felicity said, unconsciously patting Nyssa's hand. "You really don't want to go after this one."

"Don't worry," Caitlin said, narrowing her eyes at Cisco in mock-severity. "I know how to perform a lobotomy."

Felicity had to laugh with them. Her shoulders cricked tiredly, but she just shifted her position in the chair and settled in again. Caitlin sighed, her smile fading as she looked down at Nyssa again. She chafed her ring finger sometimes, as if she was missing something, her eyes far away.

"You know," she said, softly, "I've seen my share of operations and it never ceases to amaze me — that knife-edge of a difference between life and death."
"Some people get lucky," Felicity said, exchanging a glance with Cisco. She'd gotten to know Caitlin pretty well over the last year, including the fact that she'd had a fiancé. Past tense.

Caitlin made a pea-sized gap between her thumb and index finger. "That much," she said, meeting Felicity's eyes. "That's how close the blade came to her artery."

"A knife-edge," Felicity agreed.

Caitlin's eyes drifted down to Felicity's hands, still clutching Nyssa's motionless one. "Felicity," she said, gently. "Nyssa's not going to be awake for a while. She's under some pretty strong stuff."

Caitlin had a point. Felicity did glance at Nyssa's closed eyes, and watched her bandaged chest rise with her slow, regular breaths. In the grand tradition of Team Arrow (yes, she was too tired to call it anything else), there was an unspoken rule that Oliver — on the all-too-frequent occasions when he was on the table — would never be alone when he eventually came to, regardless of how long it took.

There was no way that Nyssa lying in recovery could ever come close to the times when Oliver had been in the same position, but more than ever, Felicity felt the chilliness of the unheated train compartment and heard the odd creaks and snaps of worn metal in the walls.

If it were her, she wouldn't want to be alone when she woke up.

"I know," Felicity said, "but I kinda want to stay with her. She shouldn't wake up alone, you know?"

There was a muffled bang from the doorway. Grimacing from a probable slip-and-bang situation, Barry stuck his head inside the compartment. Perfect timing, as always.

"Hey guys," he said, breathlessly, "Dig got some food for us. I figured I'd let you guys go at it before I —"

"— scarf down all the beef-and-guac tacos again?" Cisco bounded down the steps and disappeared.

"Cisco gets excited about things," Caitlin said, apologetically. "He has a passable EQ — trust me — I checked."

Felicity smiled. "It's fine, Caitlin. Go eat something, then get some rest — seriously. Plenty of room on the train."

Felicity knew Caitlin was tired when she agreed, shaking her beautiful red hair from the knot at the back of her head and loping down the steps. Breathing a sigh that wasn't really in relief, Felicity leaned forward in her chair and propped her elbows up on the cold steel table. It wasn't that she didn't want Team Flash around — she did. But sometimes when she could feel the blood throbbing inside her head and the backs of her eyes burn with the strain of keeping herself awake — it was easier to be by herself.

Except she wasn't.

Barry ducked his head (unnecessarily) as he came in. "Hey, Felicity."

"Hi, Barry," she said, with a small smile.

Oliver spun a dart nimbly between his fingers, his eyes on the news while his hands subconsciously lapsed into dexterity training. The others were clustered around one of the tables, eating their first
meal since the bodies had dropped. But Oliver didn't feel like food.

Diggle silently joined Oliver at the outer edge of the circle. He turned his head slightly in acknowledgment of his friend's presence before facing the monitors again, watching the news coverage of the third terrorist attack in Starling's history.

"You should get some sleep," Oliver said, without taking his eyes off the screens.

Diggle made a skeptical noise. "I was just about to tell you to do the same."

Oliver couldn't rest, even if he wanted to. The bulk of his attention was focused on assessing the risks and twisting his brain into tighter and tighter knots trying to anticipate the impossible, trying to predict Ra's al Ghul.

But he only shook his head. "I can't, John."

"Oliver, you're not gonna be much help to the city dead on your feet."

Oliver cast a sidelong glance at Diggle, but said nothing. Diggle sighed heavily, as if he was resigning himself to Oliver's stubbornness.

"So what are the chances that Ra's al Ghul's gonna be satisfied with killing his only daughter? Slim to zero?"

Oliver sighed. "We don't even know when Nyssa will wake up."

"Felicity hasn't taken a break either," said Diggle. "I was thinking that maybe you could talk to her."

Oliver tracked Diggle's gaze to the train compartment, the windows still blazing bright. He knew Felicity was inside, sitting by Nyssa, waiting and watching. Because she felt as responsible as Oliver did — because she understood, like he did, how much everything hinged on Nyssa being able to oppose her father. Their time in Nanda Parbat showed them that the League was something else — an organization built on archaic, mythical values of blood ties and a shared history of war. They wouldn't answer to a freshly blooded member like Oliver. They would answer only to a General.

If Nyssa died, her faction would never follow someone like Oliver, and they knew it. Which was why he couldn't sleep — not until he knew for sure that there was still hope.

"Caitlin's gonna run some tests on the blood sample you got from Ra's, then we'll know for sure whether he's really as hard to kill as he looks."

Oliver nodded. "Good," he said, flatly. "Good."

Diggle glanced at the train again before turning back to him. "Oliver," he said, carefully, "how did Ra's find out?"

Oliver caught the dart in his hand with a faint snick. "I don't know," he said, and meant it. "Maybe we weren't careful enough," Oliver said, quietly. "Maybe he recognized Felicity from Nanda Parbat. I've been turning it over and over in my head and what it comes down to is war. He's not just making war on Starling City. He came to find me — he came to find us."

"Ra's al Ghul is not Slade. He wouldn't jeopardize his operations the way Slade did just to score a point of you."

"You're right," Oliver said, staring blindly into the darkness. "Ra's isn't Slade. It means he won't get
distracted and lose sight of the present danger like Slade did. It means I can't outsmart him the way I outsmarted Slade. It means that this time — everyone, you, Lyla, Thea, Roy, Felicity — everyone is truly in danger from a threat I don't know how to stop...because of me. Because —"

"—because you refused to darken your soul the way Ra's al Ghul wanted you to?" Diggle finished, bluntly. "Because you refused to dishonor everyone you love by becoming the killer we all know you aren't anymore? If we're all in danger because of that, I don't see it as anyone's fault — because you're doing the right thing. It's not easy — it was never going to be easy. But it means we know where we stand, in the right. And I need you to promise me," Diggle came around to stand in front of Oliver, looking him squarely in the eye. "I need you to promise me that you'll remember — remember that you're not the Hood anymore. You're the Arrow, and more importantly, you're Oliver Queen. That's why Ra's al Ghul is so afraid of you. Because he knows you're someone he can't corrupt."

Oliver knew the truth in Diggle's words, but he also tasted the bitterness of it in his mouth, the shadow at the back of his mind.

"But now he knows why, John," Oliver said, feeling his reserve crack. "He knows. He's seen Felicity, and now he knows what she means to me and I can't — I won't — lose her."

Diggle's hand gripped his shoulder and Oliver felt like a boy again — helpless, forced to admit his worst fears.

"So don't," he said, firmly. "You won't lose her until you stop fighting for her. And I know how stubborn the both of you can be — which means that she'll be fighting for you, too."

They both looked around at the sound of Cisco bounding down the steps, nearly crashing into the table in his haste to get at the food.

"Speaking of," said Diggle, as Barry disappeared inside the train. He shot Oliver a look. "What are you gonna do about that?"

Chapter End Notes

Jeez, so many of you actually thought I killed Nyssa. I'm not THAT awful.

Side note - watching Felicity switch off the foundry lights in the new promo kills me. I just had to say that.

(WARNING: UNFILTERED RANT ABOUT TO COME)

OKAY AND ALSO OF 11:05 PM I HAVE JUST SEEN THE DELETED 2X23 KISS AND ALL I CAN SAY IS HOLY SHIT HOLY SHIT HOLY SHIT WHY WOULD YOU CUT THAT
Barry looked sheepishly embarrassed, rubbing the back of his head like he was trying to smooth down his hair (which stubbornly remained at attention). He'd changed out of his suit, but was wearing a Star Labs sweatshirt and sweatpants instead of his regular stuff — for some reason.

"I take it you forgot your clothes," Felicity guessed.

"Caitlin thought I would." Barry scratched his nose awkwardly. "She keeps a bag in her car — for emergencies. Didn't exactly have time to pack when I got the call."

"Well, I'm glad you kept your promise. *Race over in a heartbeat*, right?" Felicity said, and smiled.

Felicity always assumed it was something to do with his eyebrows, or the fact that she was just so used to seeing everyone be broody, but when Barry smiled — smiled for real — his whole face lit up in a way that made her feel a little less tired.

His sneakers squeaked as he circled around to the opposite side of the table, pulling a wrapped burger absent-mindedly from his pocket as he did.

Felicity was still eyeing the burger dubiously. It was Big Belly, so that wasn't the problem — but she failed to understand how Barry could stuff whole burgers into his sweatpants. Or how he could eat them and still have the build of a long-distance track athlete. Even with what she knew about his insane metabolism — it just didn't seem fair.

"Thank you, Felicity — for before. I *freaked* out, and I know I shouldn't have, but I did. I'm sorry I almost cost you guys."

"Barry," she said, firmly. "Nyssa wouldn't be alive right now if it wasn't for you. Freakout or no freakout, you got the job done and saved a life. If anything, we're sorry for involving you in this."

Barry was still looking thoughtfully at his burger, as if he was (hopefully) pondering a deeper question.

Felicity leaned forward. "You can always talk to me, Barry."

"It's nothing," he said, quickly. "It's just — who is she, really?" He tilted his head this way and that as if he was trying to figure out how he knew Nyssa's face.

"Uh — well — you won't believe me when I tell you — but she's Ra's al Ghul's daughter."

"Yeah, I got that from Oliver." Barry plopped into the seat next to her — backwards — and took a bite. "He filled me in about Ra's — and the war."

"So you know who she is," Felicity said, wondering where he was going with this.

"I know," Barry said, swallowing his mouthful. "But I don't — you know? I mean, if she's from an organization that trains *killers* to go out all over the world and do killer-y things, why are you trying so hard to save her? And by the way, that's how far I got before Oliver got all cagey — and you know, *Oliver-y*."
Felicity smiled, in spite of herself. "I do know that," she said, before she sighed. "It's not as simple as 'she brings the army and no army equals big problems'. It's…"

She looked down at Nyssa's hand, clasped in hers. Tapered fingertips and graceful, strong palms. Hands that could fire arrows that never missed and twirl a heavy sword through the air like an Amazon. Hands that had shown her how to throw a knife and defend herself. Hands that had saved Sara and taken her in — given her a shelter and a home in those five years of her being a ghost.

Felicity sucked in her breath. "Nyssa deserves a second chance — whatever she's done. Ra's al Ghul is a scary guy, believe me — and she's chosen to go against him because he wants a better world — a world without tyrants like him. And I know, beneath all this super-assassin-ness, that she's a person who knows what it's like to love someone — with all her heart. She's someone who knows what it's like to be completely destroyed after that person dies — and still find a way to put herself back together." She lifted her shoulders and smiled at Barry. "I guess I think she deserves a shot at that — at another life."

Barry’s expression turned serious. His sneakers squeaking against the floor, he shifted awkwardly in his chair so that he was knee to knee with Felicity. It wasn't like he was a good liar or anything (she was starting to see a trend with heroes and their ability to come up with cover stories), and she was generally good at reading him. Right now — he was giving off concern in waves. "Like you and Oliver?" he said, frankly.

That was not what she'd meant. At all. "Barry, Oliver never died."

"He was MIA for a year," Barry said, earnestly. "I know we talked about this — but are you guys — I mean — a whole year — what happened?"

"We're fine, Barry," Felicity said firmly, looking him in the eye. "What about you and Iris?"

Barry gave her a look. "We're fine, Felicity."

She gave him a sympathetic pat on the knee. "Still with Eddie?"

"And going strong," he said, with a bright smile as taut as a piano wire. "I'm missing one of their dinner party things tonight, actually. Kinda glad not to be there — not — that I wished — in any way — for a crisis to happen, I swear, I don't do that, I just run faster than the speed of sound."

"Speedster and controlling the future is a little like a hat on a hat," she agreed, snapping her fingers in mock-frustration. Barry laughed and swiveled in his chair. Felicity waited for him to look up at her and smile in his unflappable Barry-Allen way, but he was still looking at his scuffed sneakers thoughtfully, his mind far, far away in Central City.

She was reminded of another train, another year. The floor rattling beneath her feet, the landscape rushing past the windows in the dark. Barry admitting his feelings for Iris, her giving him some not-so-subtle advice — them admitting, mutually, that they were both waiting for people they couldn't have.

A lot had changed in that one year.

Felicity put her hand on Barry's knee. "Barry," she said, quietly, "it's not easy watching her with someone — I know that, in spades — but I also know that you're not doing yourself any favors by waiting around for her to suddenly — magically — see you in a different light."

Barry sighed. "The prevailing opinion seems to be that I should let her go. Are you gonna tell me to do that too?"
It was Felicity's turn to give him a look. "Right. Because I'm the poster child for letting people go," she said. "No — Barry, I was going to say that there's a difference between moving on and living your life. The first one — hard. The second one — not easy, but it's better than the alternative of just waiting for her to come around. If Iris is the one — and I think you know if she is — then you're not doing yourself any favors by standing still. Just because you love her and she may not see you the same way right now doesn't preclude you from living a pretty awesome life in the meantime."

"It just means that pretty awesome life will be missing a big piece," Barry corrected, without malice — with the kind of surety that came from excessive rumination of the variety she was very familiar with. "Which makes it not that awesome. I'm the fastest man alive — and I can't move on. How's that for irony?"

"Have you considered telling her?" Felicity looked around, the beeping heart monitor, the starkly-lit train compartment. "About the Flash? The whole saving-the-city thing?"

Barry mimed a throat-slashing motion. "I think I'd rather be the guy on Oliver Queen's bad side than break my promises. And I made a pretty big one to Iris's dad that I'd keep her out of all this."

"Cop dad is a pretty tough one," she agreed. "Okay, but the earlier stuff still stands. Just because you love her doesn't mean you have to stay on a shelf. You could turn on the lights to try and get her attention, but sometimes you just have to trust that she'll find her way back to you. And she will, Barry."

Barry looked at her for a long time, before the smile became a full-blown grin, and Felicity knew he was okay. "I can't believe we're sitting here — the whole world going to hell — giving each other love advice. We are the worst examples of not being pining and lovelorn — except in your case, Oliver actually feels the same way about you, he's just full of crap like he usually is."

Barry cracked up at the sight of Felicity's can't-disagree-with-you expression, spinning a full round in his chair before turning back to face her. "You know, Oliver told me once that guys like him don't get the — gargh."

He was looking over her shoulder like he'd just seen Death coming at him.

Felicity had a feeling she knew who it was before she turned in her chair. But she did anyway, and saw Oliver standing in the doorway.

"Hey," Oliver said. He had a steaming mug of coffee in one hand, and the other was still raised, poised to knock on the door.

He'd been around Thea long enough to know what a guilty expression looked like, and he wasn't surprised to see a vague rendition of it on Barry's face. Just mildly curious as to what he'd done to warrant that kind of shiftiness.

Maybe he should have left them alone — maybe he should have waited. But — as little as he liked to admit it — there was a part of him that knew Felicity and Barry would always be a something, and maybe he'd wanted an excuse to check in on her.

"I thought you'd be by yourself," he said, climbing inside the compartment.

"I was just eating a burger — oh — you were talking to Felicity," Barry said, crumpling up the empty Big Belly wrapper and stuffing it into his pocket. "Sorry — trains make me say weird things. I think I'm so used to falling asleep in them, I just get a little loopy —"
"—Barry," Oliver said, briefly torn between amusement and exasperation — a common confusion of emotions whenever Barry was around. "Relax. Whatever you broke, just put it back together and we'll all pretend not to notice."

Barry made a thumbs-up. "Noted."

"Is that for me?" Felicity said, eyeing the mug in his hand like she doubted its existence. "Did you actually bring me coffee?"

Oliver pressed it into her hand, and felt himself smile at an old memory. "One," he said, and could tell from the slow smile warming her face that she was remembering it too — a shared secret.

Oliver leaned on the edge of the operating table, noting that Nyssa's hand was open where Felicity had put it down. Even though he wasn't usually awake to see her bedside manner, he guessed that she probably hadn't moved since the surgery.

"How is she?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Felicity smiled tiredly, over the steaming mug of coffee. "Her heart stopped three times while Caitlin was operating, but that doesn't seem to have made a dent in her. Whatever Nanda Parbatians eat, it's working."

Only Barry laughed, and Oliver shot him a look. "What? It's a funny word," said Barry.

"Don't worry, Oliver," said Felicity. "I'm used to waiting by unconscious people equipped with superior combat skills."

Oliver folded his arms. "Felicity, I can stay with her. Go and get some rest."

Felicity snorted. "I'm sorry, but the last time Roy got a cold, he said you fed him something with a black chicken talon in it. I am not leaving you alone beside a sickbed."

"You eat black chicken talons when you have a cold?" Barry looked both horrified and fascinated at the same time.

"Felicity," Oliver said, firmly. "We can't do anything until Nyssa wakes up. You've been on your feet for a whole day — you need to sleep."

"Have you slept?"

"He doesn't sleep," said Barry.

Oliver ignored him. "Someone has to keep watch for new developments."

"Are they sending in the army?" Felicity asked. "Is the bunker still occupied?"

Oliver knew she was trying to change the subject, and he knew very well how she could be as stubborn as him, which left him with a few options. Unfortunately, one of them was a variation of quid pro quo. "If you eat something, I will fill you in on everything that is happening. Then you can come back here if you want."

Barry raised his hand like he was in class. "I could stay with — uh — Nyssa. I babysat my neighbor's cat a couple of times. And I was in a coma for nine months, so…"

Oliver shut his eyes briefly at the profound lack of help Barry sometimes was, and turned back to Felicity. "Five minutes," he said.
Felicity turned to Barry. "Don't touch anything, and call if she wakes up."

Barry nodded, serious for once. "Absolutely. Bring me back a burger?"

Felicity shook her head with a smile, and slipped her hand into Oliver's waiting one.

"Your hands are cold," he said, as he pulled her to her feet.

"Well, it's a good thing I have you to bring me coffee, then," she said, lightly. As if it was becoming habit, she kissed him softly on the mouth and led the way to the staircase.

For a moment, Oliver forgot that Barry was even there until he heard his name. Standing on the steps, Oliver looked back. Barry was on his feet, slowly shaking his head — like he couldn't believe it.

"You are so full of crap," he said, and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

I like Barry :) Also, I think Oliver's advice to Barry about their love lives is complete crap, as you can see from the above.
Felicity didn't realize how hungry she was until she was halfway through her container of chow mein and Oliver was surreptitiously nudging another towards her. She divided her attention between her food and the monitors, which were still turned to the news channels. It was that gray area between last night and early morning, and the news coverage showed no signs of slowing down.

"Any word from Laurel?" she asked. "The DA's office has to be on top of this, right?"

Oliver instinctively checked his phone for new messages and flipped it back over when there were no updates. "I talked to her earlier. They want to prosecute, but the League isn't exactly easy to pin down. Laurel doesn't want her father involved, and —"

" — Captain Lance hasn't called his old friend the Arrow for a while?"

"That too," Oliver admitted.

"Well," said Felicity, "if everything goes according to plan, the fighting won't be in the streets, and Captain Lance, along with the nice folks at SCPD, never have to know what went on in the bunker."

Oliver grimaced, as if he was thinking of the very big part of the plan that once hinged on Nyssa being trusted by Ra's al Ghul — now not so much.

"Hey," said Felicity, accidentally flicking a piece of carrot at him when she tried to get his attention. "We'll figure it out."

Oliver nodded, and they both turned to face the screens.

"Guys," Lyla called. "We're starting."

Oliver got to his feet immediately, as if he knew what she was talking about.

Felicity still had her chopsticks in her mouth. "Starting what?" she asked, through the food.

The first thing she saw on the steel worktable was the STAR Labs case, propped open, and a few vials of the clear-ish black liquid perched next to it. As if that wasn't bad enough, Caitlin held up a syringe. "Inoculation," she said.

Felicity very quietly choked.

"I'll go first," said Oliver, already rolling up his sleeve.

"Whoa," said Cisco, staring at Oliver's arm — which admittedly had always been at a consistent state of impressive, what with the muscles and all.

Even from the geneticist's standpoint it was impressive, because Caitlin cleared her throat loudly and shook her head like she had water in her ears.

"Are we sure about this?" Felicity asked, as Caitlin swabbed a spot on Oliver's forearm.
"Nope," said Roy. "But then again, I don't like needles."

"What are the chances of adverse effects?" Lyla asked, evenly.

"There's a small proportion of the gas in the formula," said Caitlin, smoothly drawing fluid from the vial, "but that shouldn't be a problem. Your metabolisms should be able to handle it just fine. At most, I'd say there's a chance you'll experience some tenderness and swelling at the injection site, maybe a little vomiting, definitely not a seizure."

"Reassuring," said Diggle.

Felicity looked over her shoulder. "Shouldn't Barry be here for this?"

"Oh, he doesn't need it," said Cisco. "The way his metabolism works — he won't feel a thing even if they hit him with a full dose. We actually used some of his blood in the making-of process — funny story —"

"—Cisco," said Oliver, before turning back to Caitlin. "Please."

Caitlin's hands were sure as she sank the needle into Oliver's vein and slowly depressed the plunger. Oliver's expression didn't change. No one around the table seemed to be breathing — and all Felicity could think of was the risks they kept taking to beat Ra's al Ghul, and how they'd better be worth it.

She also really wanted to be watching it through her fingers, or maybe not at all.

"All done," said Caitlin. "Who's next?"

There was a deafening crash — coming from inside the train.

"Oh no," said Felicity, staring at the open doorway.

Oliver and Diggle reached the door first, disappearing inside. Felicity rushed up the steps just in time to see a very strange picture. Surgical instruments scattered all over the floor from the overturned table, Barry — his face purple — choking because of the hand around his throat, and Nyssa — very awake — half-off the table, her eyes blazing with fury.

"What," she said, in a murderous voice, "happened?"

The heart monitor was flat-lining shrilly from the torn leads lying on the ground, the bag of saline leaking from ripped tubes.

"Ol-i-ver." Barry's bloodshot eyes were bulging in his skull. "Little — help — here."

Oliver gripped Nyssa's wrist, but her fingers remained claw-like around Barry's throat, and he didn't doubt that she could crush the soft tissue and cartilage one-handedly — even if she had been in a coma seconds before.


"Where is my father?" she hissed.

Felicity slammed into the table. "Nyssa!" she cried. "Stop!"

"Someone betrayed me," she said. "Oliver Queen — you put your trust in others too easily, and this is the consequence."
Oliver glanced at Diggle, who was standing ready behind Nyssa with a syringe full of a sedative. They'd wanted her awake, but not like this. She was angry — practically bristling with it — and he had no doubt that she would try to kill everyone in this room because of misdirected fury.

"Attempt to drug me and you will lose that hand," snapped Nyssa, before turning back to Oliver, her eyes blazing with fury. "Who is the betrayer?"

Oliver didn't loosen his hold on Nyssa. "We don't know, but there's no point in turning on each other. The city is going to crumble and fall unless we stop Ra's."

Nyssa's hand twitched, her eyes slowly widening. "He ran me through," she said, in a low voice. Her other hand was splayed across the bandaged wound, as if she was remembering. "With his own blade. A mortal wound. Fire — racing across the water. It consumed me."

Oliver could tell that Nyssa's mind was wandering as her memory caught up to the present.


"Ta-er al-Sahfer," she whispered abruptly, to the empty air. "I see you."

Only Oliver could have understood the Arabic, and he knew — suddenly — what she was seeing. Her last thoughts — the memories her mind had drawn from the sum of her days, the ones that shone brighter than the rest. The one face she saw — even beyond death.

Sara.

"Nyssa," Oliver said, in Arabic, "come back. Come back to us."

Nyssa turned her head towards his voice, but her eyes were unseeing. Felicity's grip tightened on Oliver's sleeve — silently holding him still — as she bent to look into Nyssa's face.

"Nyssa?" she said, softly. "It's all right. You're safe now."

Nyssa abruptly loosened her grip on Barry's throat and stared at Felicity like she had never seen her before, her eyes wide and trance-like. Felicity nudged Oliver silently — who swiftly pried Nyssa's fingers off Barry's livid throat and hauled him safely out of the way.

"What is with the throat-grabs?" Barry croaked, massaging his esophagus — livid with red fingermarks. Caitlin crouched beside him in concern, the both of them looking warily at Nyssa.

Oliver turned back around — expecting a feral animal. But what he found was different. It was dark and light, an unlikely combination of warrior and — something else. Felicity was kneeling near the operating table, holding Nyssa's slack hands in her own while she murmured soothing things, focused on keeping her calm.

"Sa'ida," Nyssa answered, in a very different voice. It was throatier, barely above a whisper. Oliver knew who that voice was meant for even before Nyssa trailed her fingers down the side of Felicity's face, as gentle as a lover. "Sara," she murmured.

Still in her dream, Nyssa pulled Felicity close — without warning, without preamble — and kissed her in front of everyone, as if they were all alone.

As if it had been Sara, alive again.

Felicity's mind didn't go blissfully blank. Nope. That only happened with a certain someone — and
that certain someone was assuredly not Heir to the Demon.

Nyssa had kissed her.

Correction.

Nyssa was kissing her.

(Emphasis on the still-happening part of it)

Felicity was aware of the general flabbergasted vibe in the room. She heard Cisco say — very loudly — "oh," as if he'd suddenly understood why going after Nyssa al Ghul was admittedly an unwise idea.

Before the kiss, she'd heard Sara's name, and Sa'ida — two names she'd thought were mutually exclusive in Nyssa's head, but apparently weren't. She'd assumed the resemblance between her and Sara ended at hair color. Build-wise, Sara was an Amazon, while Felicity had the muscle-deficient build of a college nerd. Sara could incapacitate a squadron of would-be rapists with one hand tied behind her back, while Felicity had barely mastered the basics of holding a weapon without accidentally (and painfully) dropping it on her own foot.

But somehow — for some reason — Nyssa had come back from the dead with the misconception that she and Sara Lance were one and the same, as if she'd recognized something in Felicity that she'd once seen in Sara.

It was a mixture of guilt and wistfulness, because Felicity didn't want to remind Nyssa that Sara wasn't with them anymore, all over again.

But suddenly it seemed like she didn't need reminding.

Nyssa pulled away, and Felicity stared at her, her mouth slightly open in surprise. Nyssa's expression was — for only an instant — what she must have felt. There was a crack in the onyx facade and Felicity saw the darkness inside —the tattered shreds of her heart she'd seen before in Nanda Parbat.

"Nyssa?" Felicity said, cautiously.

"Ta-er al-Sahfer is gone," Nyssa said, softly. Her fingertips stroked the side of Felicity's face with a tenderness she never thought she'd see.

Felicity cupped the hand on her face in a wordless gesture of comfort. "I'm sorry."

"—and my father must pay."

The crack glossed over with a snap only audible to Felicity, who flinched and backed away, until she felt Oliver's presence at her back, the heat of his palm burning into her cold hands.

Nyssa slid from the table and landed with a thud of boots on metal. She methodically shed the remaining leads and IV line from her wrist, tossing them onto the table with something resembling contempt.

"Too much time has been wasted. I must go and alert my lieutenants that the Demon's Heir still lives and breathes. Oliver —" she said, with the preememptory tone of an order, "— come with me."

Her black gaze searched the rest of them — including Felicity — as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.
"The rest of you may retire to your chambers. We meet in the morning to discuss our next move."

Felicity tried again. "Nyssa," she said. "You have to rest."

Nyssa inclined her head. With a blade-like smile and fire in her eyes, she was heartbreakingly, dangerously beautiful. Felicity knew this — the forced momentum of rage and the sadness beneath the veneer. She'd seen it before, in Oliver, after Sara — after Tommy.

Maybe after her, as well.

"I will rest," said Nyssa, "when my father is dead."

She was the Demon's Heir again. Felicity felt Oliver's hand squeeze hers, briefly, and she turned to him, urgently pulling his face down to hers. "Take care of her," she said, in a frantic whisper. "Be careful."

Oliver pressed a kiss into the side of her head. "I know," he said back, his hand trailing across her cheek as he followed Nyssa from the room. Felicity swayed in the still air, suddenly bereft, and very tired.

In the ringing silence, Barry was the first one to speak.

"What was that?"

Felicity gripped the edge of the table in support. "Nyssa al Ghul," she said, as if that explained it all.

Chapter End Notes

THREE DAYS TO 3x10.

Whoops if "that" was a surprise (welcome/unwelcome), but Nyssa waking up from a coma was always going to have its unexpected elements. Anyways, the plan is back on.
Oliver watched Nyssa out the corner of his eye. Half of his attention was focused on making sure that she didn't collapse from her injuries. The other half of him was mulling over what happened in the Foundry. Nyssa — caught between the haze of memory and reality — had kissed Felicity.

It wasn't like jealousy, nothing like that. Oliver knew what jealousy felt like from watching Felicity with Ray, and before that — Barry. What he felt, watching Nyssa's stern profile and remembering the way she'd whispered Sara's name…it was an odd combination of melancholy and pity, that Nyssa still loved Sara more than they knew, more than she felt safe enough to show.

It was a lonely life. Trusting no one, not even Oliver, who knew what it was like to love in a way that was both sword and shield. Loving Felicity could, and had raised him from the darkness, but losing her — as he remembered, too well — would be infinitely more destructive than any of his demons.

The night breeze lifted the edges of his hood, pulled low over his eyes, as they observed the sprawl of Starling City below them. Lights still burned in the early morning, brighter than the unseen stars. They were crouched on the metal foundations of an unfinished building, swallowed by shadow — waiting, watching.

Oliver's bow was on his knee, an arrow loaded and ready to fire.

"You and I," Nyssa said, her voice slow and thoughtful, "are more alike than either of us wish to believe."

"How so?" Oliver asked, cautiously.

"Whether by design — of some obscure, higher power — or pure chance, we were both drawn to souls infinitely better than ours. As if we coveted the unscarred beauty of an untainted soul — the kind of beauty we'd lost long, long ago. And we loved, the way a blind man yearns to see the light, the way a man dying of thirst looks at the sea and wishes to drown, the way a sinner craves salvation. To our detriment. To our destruction." Her breath misted in the cold air, swept away by the night winds. The shadow clung to the sharp edges in her features, and the amber lights in her eyes made her vengeful.

Oliver tensed as her face twitched in a spasm of pain, but she only shrugged it off, sucking in a breath of cold air.

"You should rest," Oliver said. "A wound like that was meant to hurt."

Nyssa laughed softly, a low ripple of derision. "It may come as no surprise to you, Oliver Queen, but my father has done far, far worse to me."

Oliver said nothing — well aware of Ra's' methods.

"Worry not, Oliver Queen," she said. "My anger overpowers my pain. Come tomorrow, I will see my father impaled on his own blade. For her."

When Nyssa emptied her lungs, her sigh was deep and full of old longing.
"My father told me — before he drove a blade through my body — that my love for **Ta'er al-Sahfer** made me foolish, that it made me weak. So perhaps it was my fault that I was betrayed, because I loved her too well, and my father could see the fury in my eyes when I forced myself to look at him."

*I'm willing to regret you, for the rest of my life.*

"Nyssa," Oliver said. "I know you and I haven't always seen eye to eye, but regretting that you loved her, and regretting you lost her...are two very different things. Regretting that you lost Sara too soon — I understand that, I do. But there is no force in the world that should make you regret loving someone like Sara, just like there is nothing in the world that could make me regret loving Felicity."

"Even if you lost her tomorrow?" Nyssa asked, with a dark gleam.

Oliver knew she was thinking of his fury — directed at her when he'd thought she killed Felicity. That was a darker, elemental anger — the kind Ra's wanted from him, the kind that resembled most closely his persona as the Hood.

But it wasn't anger that he'd ever loved Felicity, no — losing her would be a sorrow, but every moment of loving her was a privilege.

"Even if I lost her tomorrow," he repeated.

Nyssa lifted her chin and let her dark hair fan out in the night wind, her obsidian eyes reflecting the blaze of the city below.

"Sa'ida," she said, "in another world, means Sara. Because I sensed — from the moment she agreed to come with me to Nanda Parbat, to save you — that she and Sara were more alike than anyone knew. Beauty — of course — but a will of iron to match it. Salvation to love, and destruction to lose."

Oliver looked carefully at Nyssa for her trademark mockery, but found nothing except wistfulness — and a strange moment of understanding.

"**Ta'er al-Sahfer** was my last thought in death and my first in the life I thought I'd lost. Needless to say, Oliver Queen, you would do well to protect your little bird. Should his claws encircle her throat, my father can and will use her against you."

"Not this time," Oliver said, with a shudder of knowing — that he would kill Ra's al Ghul before he'd extinguish her light.

But Nyssa wasn't listening anymore.

"Time," she said, and drew her bow in one fluid movement, unhampered by the injury. "On my mark."

Oliver released his arrow on her count, watched it hurtle through the air and burst — briefly — into a green flame.

"Why green?" he asked, watching the twin flames spin soundlessly through the air and vanish.

"Any flame would have sufficed, really," said Nyssa, sliding her bow back to her side. "What matter are the time, and the number. But I thought green would be rather appropriate — given the circumstances."

Oliver followed her to the ledge, to the yawning mouth of the world below. Nyssa gripped the rope
and started to climb down, but glanced briefly up to give him one of her dark smiles.

"The green flame is a sign of resurrection, you see," she said, and slid out of sight.

"Are you sure Oliver and Nyssa won't mind that we're all still here?" Caitlin asked. "She did tell us to — um — retire." Her hesitation was a pretty normal reaction to Nyssa's previous-century-speak.

Felicity winced as she heard another whump-and-groan from a body hitting the mat. She peered up from behind the monitors and saw that Barry had knocked Roy flat — for some reason.

"When I fight you, it's literally like you're standing still," said Barry, grinning as he looked down at Roy.

Roy grunted, heaving himself off the sparring mat. "Yeah, well, that's why the whole exercise was directed at Cisco — not you."

Cisco cracked his knuckles enthusiastically. "Cool — because I've totally been practicing that salmon ladder stuff back home."

Roy rolled his eyes and hauled Cisco into the center of the mats. "Yeah, the salmon ladder isn't going to help if you come up against an assassin. Now, based on appearances alone, I recommend you run — or scream loud enough for your friend Barry to hear you. But assuming that fails, plan B is knowing how to throw a punch." Roy folded his arms. "Now make a fist."

Felicity tried not to laugh at Roy's newfound smugness at his reversed role as mentor, Cisco's expression of intense concentration, partly because her own attempts at self-defense had ended with five scarring injuries down her back and cracked ribs.

"We're not really into the actual fighting part of the vigilantism," Caitlin said apologetically. "Sorry if we're —"

Cisco hit the floor with an audible smack, and they both winced.

"—not that coordinated," she finished, resignedly, and unscrewed the bottle of isopropyl alcohol again.

"Well, as you can see, trying to be a badass in front of a League assassin only gets you so far," Felicity said, glancing over her shoulder, as if she could see the five parallel staple trails across her back, injuries that Caitlin was in the process of cleaning. "Thanks for doing this, by the way. I know cleaning cuts isn't exactly in your job description."

"Felicity, please — I'd do anything to help a friend." Frowning slightly, Caitlin bent to inspect the staples. "It's healing well — which means it shouldn't scar too badly — that being said…these look like claw marks."

"Yup." Felicity made a half-hearted attempt at a lion impression, which turned out more like Michael-Jackson-à-la-Thriller, so she stopped. "The League of Assassins really celebrates diversity in fighting techniques. Claws, poison, Bo staffs…you name it."

"Oh," said Caitlin, who started to dab at the staples with a bemused expression on her face. When she spoke again, her voice was an octave higher than usual. "Maybe I should rethink Mr. Diggle's offer to teach me how to shoot."

"Do you want to?" Felicity asked, and she would have turned all the way around, except Caitlin put
a restraining hand on her back to keep her still.

"But Mr. Diggle's busy," Caitlin said, glancing at the practice area, where Diggle had taken over with Cisco so that Roy could teach Barry how to hold and shoot a bow — convincingly.

"I could ask Lyla."

"No, that's okay — really —"

"Lyla!"

"No, Felicity — Cisco and I actually came prepared," she said, hastily. "STAR Labs hasn't seen much demand lately, so we've got some stuff lying around in storage." Caitlin leaned back in her chair, removing her gloves. "There — all done."

"Such as...?" Felicity said, intrigued. "I thought you said the cold gun got dismantled."

"Oh." A smile spread slowly across Caitlin's face. "We didn't bring a gun."

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"Whoa," said Roy.

Felicity agreed. She stared at the open briefcase — one of many, all from in the trunk of Caitlin's car. Lyla was inspecting what looked like a can of mace, turning it over in her hands.

"I think that one extends into a stun rod," said Caitlin. "But you'd have to check the base for color-coding. Green is chemical, yellow is stun, and red is —"

"—bodily harm," said Lyla. "Got it. Are these legal?"

"They're mostly STAR Labs prototypes," said Caitlin. "Stuff the team was working on before the explosion, almost pushed to marketing stage. Some of these are Cisco's toys, which he's really psyched about sharing with you guys."

Cisco — who'd been showing Roy some kind of modified Bo staff — looked up at the mention of his name and grinned. "Hell yeah. My toys have a smiley face on them."

Felicity looked back at the prototypes, thoroughly weirded out. They were somehow a combination of odd and innocuous, almost ordinary, but not quite. She picked up a taser gun, and was surprised at how heavy it was.

"Technically," she said, "this could be a gun."

Caitlin raised both hands. "Careful with that," she warned. "Don't point that thing at yourself — you'd think I wouldn't have to say it — but you'd be surprised." She glared pointedly at Barry, who coughed loudly.

"I thought it was a taser," he said, awkwardly.

"How would that make it any better?" Caitlin asked, waving her hands like they'd had the argument before.

"I was trying to see how fast I'd heal after —"

"—so what is it?" Diggle interrupted, careful to keep out of the firing line.
Caitlin ran her finger along the front of the gun, where instead of the taser prongs, there was a reflective glass panel. "See that? It releases a flare of light designed to stun, so if it was pointed at — say — Barry, it'd deliver an ocular-targeting pulse and Barry basically wouldn't be able to see for about five to ten minutes. That's assuming his retinas recover at their accelerated rate, of course. For a regular person, I'd say it'd take around forty minutes."

Diggle looked impressed. Felicity let Caitlin explain the rest of the tech while she circled the table, content to look. Her time in the Foundry and a dislike of pointy objects basically meant that she was totally cool with Oliver's don't-touch-that regulations. But she had to admit that some of the stuff did sound pretty cool.

"I've seen you before," she said, picking up a black sphere, near the corner of the table. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, and looked surprisingly familiar — she just couldn't place it.

"Caitlin?" she asked. "What does this d—?

"Cisco!"

Felicity looked up just as a metallic blur whizzed towards her, and she ducked — just not fast enough.

Without warning, a red streak slammed Felicity into the ground — hard enough to jar her wrist against the floor. The black sphere soared out of her open hand, and — half-dazed from hitting the ground — she watched it trace a lazy arc as it fell...

Until it hit the ground and released a deafening shriek. It was as unnatural as a banshee's scream — the piercing sound rising to the ceiling like an aerie of eagles crying — achingly familiar...

A bird.

A bird's cry.

Felicity realized why it sounded so haunting to her — why she should have recognized it immediately.

Sara.

Before she could move, the sound abruptly stopped, and a metallic disc — the blur from before — spun to rest somewhere between the table and Felicity's outstretched hand, as if it'd been kicked out of the way. There was a grinning yellow face on the flat surface — trademark of Cisco.

Her ears were still ringing in the abrupt silence when she looked up, and saw Oliver holding the black sphere in his hand, looking like someone who'd gone to run errands for a bit and come back to find his house in chaos.

Well, if chaos included an eardrum-rattling sonic scream and a lot of broken glass.

Nyssa emerged from behind him, staring them all down. "Is this how your team prepares for battle?" she asked, her voice rippling with suppressed fury.

Felicity knew why she was so angry. She had to have fought with Sara before — so she recognized the Canary Cry just as well as they did, except it probably hurt her more than any of them. The only thing Felicity saw was the paleness of her face, in stark contrast to the black of her eyes — before she turned and disappeared into the shadows without another word.
Oliver grimaced and turned back to them.

"What happened?" he said, with the angry-face to match his tone.

There was a crash as something — probably a pane of glass — splintered in the background. Cisco scooted out from behind a table, his hand raised like a boy scout. "That's my bad — sorry! That's on me!"

Oliver was weighing the device in his hand with an oddly blank expression that Felicity understood — with a pang. Felicity remembered it well enough from the police reports, and the times Sara had used it on Oliver prior to her joining the team. The Canary Cry was Sara's as much as the bow and arrow was Oliver's, and her not being there to use it — just reminded them of why.

But Felicity saw it differently.

The Canary's Cry lived on, because STAR Labs had — knowingly or not — recreated Sara Lance's sonic device, and they would use it to honor their fallen friend in the war against the man that killed her.

For the Canary, Felicity thought.

For Sara.

Chapter End Notes

The sonic device Sara makes a reappearance here, especially since I'm still wondering what happened to it in the second half of season 2 (vanished without a trace :-/). Plus, Sara Lance really is an awesome character, and it really hurts that she was killed off.

Anyway, like I've said before, Nyssa and Oliver do have similarities in terms of who they see as the love of their life, and their conversation was an interesting one to write. (Take Me to Church was playing in the background, Losing Your Memory, Devil's Backbone too - all good songs)

TWO DAYS.
The Foundry was dark and quiet. Everyone was resting — exhaustion being a powerful sedative. Well, almost everyone.

"Everyone settled in?" Felicity asked, looking up from the computer as Oliver reappeared from the shadows.

Oliver nodded. "Caitlin's on her own. I put Cisco with Roy — just in case he gets lost or touches something he's not supposed to —"

"— or lets loose another killer frisbee. Thanks, by the way," said Roy.

"— and Barry took my compartment, since I have all the jettisoning arrows locked up —"

"— yes, Oliver, you can crash with me," Felicity interjected. "You're welcome."

Oliver shook his head with a smile only she could see. Diggle chuckled as he cleaned his handgun, with a meticulous care that was almost soothing to watch. If she weren't busy pursuing an idea that had taken shape at the back of her mind, ever since she'd seen Ra's al Ghul in the open.

Even Nyssa al Ghul, who talked like she was from another century, knew how to blend in (i.e. dress normally). She was also willing to bet that ferrying League members all the way from Tibet wasn't cheap. No matter how twisted a terrorist organization got, how much they claimed to despise the world and everyone in it — they used money.

"Felicity," said Oliver. "What are you doing?"

"Snipping credit cards," she said, vaguely.

There was a long pause, during which she sensed the what? looks going on behind her.

"The League has to have assets somewhere, right?" she explained. "If they go out in the open and pretend to be normal people, they need to have some pretty extraordinary finances. I'm guessing they either work with blood money or seized assets from the people they've handled" (she made air quotes there) "—ergo, a money trail. But the question is where to start."

Interesting question, really. But not a hard one.

Oliver leaned closer to the screen. "You hacked into the ARGUS mainframe?"

Felicity was still typing. "Is that judgment I'm hearing?"

"Pride," he said absently, his lips moving silently as he read over her shoulder.

Diggle glanced around, like he was worried Lyla was behind them. "Why ARGUS?"

"Excellent question," Felicity said, spinning her chair in a circle. "ARGUS keeps an eye on substantial bank assets, especially the ones they think might be connected to terror organizations. The League was on their radar for a while — especially in Asia. I'll just follow that merry trail…and wipe it clean at the source. Roy — you have the dubious honor of selecting the charity that's about to
receive a substantial donation."

"Starling Earthquake Relief," he said, without hesitation.

Felicity inclined her head. "Done."

It wasn't exactly her first time, but it was an odd mixture of awesome and scary — how easily the giant number filtered its way down to zero. They all sat back and watched the money wire itself to several earthquake relief funds in Starling.

Roy gave a low whistle when it was over.

"Well," she said, with an air of finality, "that should piss him off."

"We've just stranded the League of Assassins in Starling City," said Diggle.

"It all ends tomorrow," said Felicity, and the four of them looked at each other. A year ago, they'd lost Oliver to the League and it'd been them three, sitting in a darkened Foundry, their hope torn to shreds.

But not gone for good.

Because now they had Oliver back with them.

Diggle smiled as if he could tell what Felicity was thinking. He squeezed her shoulder and stood up to go, patting Roy on the back to signal that he should do the same.

"Big day tomorrow," said Diggle. "See all of you on the other side."

Oliver held out his hand, and Diggle gripped it in a firm handshake.

"See you on the other side," he agreed.

Felicity had never seen Oliver take off his suit. Really. It'd just occurred to her that she'd never reached the extent of creepiness that involved her peeking on him changing. Or he'd had the modesty (ha-ha-ha, since he basically lived his life in the Foundry shirtless) to go elsewhere and change. But now that they were together, she was starting to notice his habit of undressing as if she wasn't even there.

His back was turned to her, but she heard the deep sigh as he lowered the hood, as though it was the only time he allowed himself to feel the weight of what he was doing as the Arrow. She perched on the edge of a worktable, in a rare space not covered by monitors and wires, and watched him without speaking.

His shoulders emerged bare from under the suit, broad and tattooed and scarred — familiar and delightfully alien at the same time. She picked up the sonic device from where it rested on the table, carefully turning it over in her hand. Oliver hadn't returned it to Cisco, and she in all honesty didn't want him to.

Because she intended to use it tomorrow.

There was a certain symmetry, beautiful and terrible, in using the Canary's cry — the cry Ra's had brutally cut short — to destroy his stronghold in a city he'd terrorized.

"It feels like she's with us, here," she said, cupping it in her hands. "Sara, I mean."
"She should have been alive to stop Ra's with us." Oliver's voice was heavy with regret, for a past love and a fallen friend. Which she loved him for, all the same.

"I know." Felicity gently put the sphere back on the table, nestling it in a coil of wires. "But we're honoring her by fighting."

"Felicity," he said, suddenly.

She looked up with a little start.

"If I asked you to stay here until it was all over — would you listen?" he asked, turning his head slightly.

Felicity frowned. "You know my answer to that. It's just like I'd never ask you to stay here, and let Nyssa fight her war."

"Because you know that if you asked —" Oliver came to stand in front of her, resting his hands on her knees. "— I'd do it."

She lifted her chin. "I know you too well — and it wouldn't be right," she agreed, softly. "We both have our parts to play in saving Starling City. And saving the city is the right thing to do — even if it means I might lose you…or you might lose me."

Oliver moved closer — even though it seemed like there wasn't any space between them — and held her, his hands locked at the base of her spine, her cheek resting on his heartbeat. He inhaled, slow and deep, like he was preserving it all — the feeling of having her near, the scent of her hair, the sound of her heartbeat.

Ever since the bunker, and Oliver admitting that he wanted to be with her, that he loved her — Felicity thought the heartbreaks were all behind her. Even when she'd given herself up to the League, back in the ARGUS bunker, she'd been so sure about saving Oliver's life — about not losing him — that it hadn't been a heartbreak.

But she wasn't sure about tomorrow. She wasn't sure that she could save Oliver's life, to stop him from the headlong collision that was his conscience against Ra's al Ghul's calculated cruelty — the light in his soul against the void of the Demon's darkness.

"I love you," he said, and the whisper broke her heart, all over again.

Felicity squeezed her eyes shut, because this night — their last night — was her moment of weakness. She was going to be strong and sure tomorrow, she was going to fight beside Oliver the next day.

But tonight was when she didn't have to hide the fact that she wasn't sure, that she didn't know if they'd see each other again, that her heart was breaking from knowing they might end.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow.

"There's one thing I'm going to promise you," she said, slowly, "and I hope that you'll promise me too."

Oliver pulled back slightly to look at her. "Anything," he said.

"Come back."
Oliver's expression froze, just a little, like he was as unsure as her — whether stopping Ra's al Ghul might cost him his life.

"I'm not asking you to lie," she said, her gaze unflinching. "I know that you can't be sure — and I can't either — because it's tomorrow and we can't promise tomorrows. But." She took a deep breath, feeling it catch in her throat. "I want you to promise me that you'll try. Do whatever it takes to beat Ra's al Ghul, but do whatever it takes to come back. That's all I'm asking you to promise — that you'll try — try — to come back to me."

Oliver's hands were on either side of her face, soft but sure.

"Whatever happens tomorrow, Felicity, I swear that I will try my hardest to come back to you. Because I love you."

Felicity closed her eyes when it was her turn, almost stumbling over her words. "I promise I'll try — to come back to you — I promise —"

But Oliver's lips were already on hers, and she couldn't find the breath to speak.

She didn't need to.

Oliver sat on the edge of the bed. He'd just checked the time, and they had a few more hours to rest. A few more moments of peace — the quiet before the storm. He sat, enveloped by the half-darkness. He was used to waking up without warning, adrenaline flooding his limbs — as though he existed in a constant state of danger. But not tonight.

Tonight he'd woken up to find Felicity asleep beside him, her head on his chest like the sound of his heartbeat soothed her. He looked over at her, looking impossibly small against the covers. The curve of her bare shoulder showed above the sheets, her hair fanned out across her naked back in a tangle of dark gold.

Felicity stayed deeply asleep and didn't stir when Oliver stroked the soft skin of her back, tracing aimless patterns with his fingertips. His mind was wandering, trying to slow down time so that he could remember this. For the past two days he'd woken without the bitter taste of fear in his mouth and blood on his hands that wasn't really there. He wanted to remember the feeling of sleeping like there was nothing to fear, like there were only good dreams to dream and a new day to wake up to.

Back in Nanda Parbat, he'd wished that he could fall asleep with Felicity beside him and wake up to her in the morning. But that wasn't enough, not anymore. Now he wanted to love her like there was nothing to lose, kiss her without tasting tears and heartbreak — he wanted to fight his way back to her so that they could continue to live.

No more goodbyes.

No more fear.

Careful not to wake Felicity, Oliver lifted her hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss into her palm, as if he had cemented the promise in his mind.

He had a reason to live — because she'd showed him one. There was too much he owed Felicity — more than she ever knew — because he'd broken her heart too many times to just slip away into the void.

So he would fight his way back to her side, whatever it took.
Because he’d made a promise.

Because he loved her.

Chapter End Notes

Totally bad-timing side note, but I'm curious about the appeal of Bratva fanfics. Can somebody tell me (besides Oliver being all broody and hot and using guns, etc. etc. — or are those the reasons?) what the appeal of Bratva fics/AUs are?

Serious question. If my weird brain ends up getting it I might actually start a Bratva thing in the next series but keep it as in canon as possible. Cheers. TWO DAYS.
Good Sign

Chapter Notes

Warning: Laurel Lance is in this chapter. Again, not a Lauriver supporter (clearly), but not a Laurel hater, just giving advance warning. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"This doesn't fit right," said Barry, pinching an extra inch or so of green leather around his chest. "Anywhere."

Felicity had to admit that the effect fell a bit short of Oliver's usual look, since Barry was about half the size of Oliver when it came to shoulder width, arm circumference — well, basically everything.

But saying that wouldn't help Barry's self-esteem. At all.

"Uh," said Felicity, "I mean — objectively speaking — it's Oliver's old suit, so…"

"Oh God, this is totally junior year of high school," Barry said, tugging at the collar like it was choking him. "Iris got me a Halloween costume and it was way too big. Why? Because I'm not built like a kung-fu ninja assassin. Nope. I'm built like an über nerd — but no one wants to look at a über nerd — they want to look at the quarterback!"

"Whoa." Felicity helped loosen his collar before he started hyperventilating. "Barry — calm down. If everything goes according to plan, we're all going to be wearing costumes that don't fit."

"My suit fits," Roy interjected — unhelpfully — and thrust a bow and quiver of arrows into Barry's arms. "Don't forget these. And you'd better remember how to aim."

"Well, yeah," Barry muttered, trying to get the quiver over his shoulder. "Doesn't mean I'll actually hit anything."

"You're kidding me," Roy sighed.

"I'm supposed to be bait, not a performing gorilla," Barry said, in a rare moment of irritability. It was probably the suit — no wonder Oliver looked grumpy all the time. "I'll just shoot an arrow over their heads — the Arrow's supposed to be big about the dramatic gestures."

Roy looked like he was about to pull a dramatic gesture of his own, of the stabby-stab variety. "The Arrow's supposed to be good, not a Katniss wannabe."

"You know, I'm surprised you read enough books to pick up that reference. But I'm very not surprised that you picked up that reference from a book meant for teenage girls."

"Guys. No time for this," Felicity said, loudly. "Roy — you're supposed to be helping, and believe you me — snark is my thing, and the snark is not doing it. Barry — try to hit something important. An arm would be good. Maybe a foot. The sign above their heads would be good — make it dramatic. Pretty-please. Now the both of you — save the killing-each-other part for later, okay?"

Roy only rolled his eyes, but Barry pulled the hood over his head and rasped, "You have failed this
"Oh God," she said. He sounded like a grizzly bear with throat cancer.

Felicity was actively — painfully — resisting the urge to pull her hair out. Her brain was already racing through the steps like a frantically over-rehearsed and over-choreographed dance, which was ironic because ha-ha-ha they'd had exactly zero opportunities to test it out.

Thankfully (i.e. before Barry broke anything else), Caitlin came bearing good news.

"Felicity!" Caitlin had a handful of auto-injector syringes in her hand. "Concentrated doses of the reconstructed fear toxin. Should be enough to overwhelm —"

"—an insane super-assassin with tyrannic tendencies?" Felicity weighed the syringes in her hand, the fluid inside them ominously black and opaque.

"That's the general idea," Caitlin said, a not-so-faint gleam of scientific mania in her eyes, which Felicity associated with too much caffeine and sleep deprivation. "Even with his hypermetabolism, the concentration should be enough to overwhelm the enzymatic conversion in the blood plasma —"

Caitlin abruptly wrenched Felicity down with a shriek, just as an arrow crashed into the light above their heads, shorting out the fluorescent panel in a shower of sparks. Still on the ground, Felicity looked back to find Roy covering his face with both hands, and Barry holding the bow awkwardly in front of him like it was a grenade about to blow.

"Sorry!" he called. "Was just — getting some practice…"

Felicity flicked a piece of broken glass from Caitlin's hair.

"This is going to work…right?" Caitlin asked, gingerly.

Felicity sighed. "Rain-check on that one."

— "Am I in the right place?"

Felicity's head shot up, and she saw Laurel standing across the carpet of broken glass, bemusedly holding up her phone.

Oliver didn't look up when he heard the crash of something breaking. He was already desensitized to the inevitable increase in accidents that accompanied Barry's presence in the Foundry. He checked his phone for Diggle's message — he and Lyla were supposed to round up the contingent of ARGUS agents and old connections, before meeting them at the train.

No update yet. But to be fair, he'd been checking constantly for the last thirty minutes.

"Anyway," Cisco said, interrupting his thoughts. "Oliver — um — N-Nyssa — I whipped up some tech for you guys in the arrow department." He shot a nervous glance in Nyssa's direction before he emptied a case of trick arrows onto the steel worktable.

"Color-coded?" Oliver asked, picking up one of the arrowheads. The one he had in his hand was roughly cylindrical and color-marked blue.

"That one uses acetylene gas to produce an oxy-fuel cutting effect —"

"— like a welding torch."
Cisco grinned. "Right. That baby'll slice right through metal. Even bunker doors. So red's explosive — I just added a little something extra to stabilize the detonation, and black's your favorite — the jettisoning arrow, which I may or may not have modified by switching out the polymer cables for a STAR Labs prototype." Cisco sifted through the mass of colored arrows to find the green ones. "Now these are standard arrows, no smoke and mirrors, but based on the bunker specs that Felicity gave me, I switched up the carbon for an aluminum-carbon composite — you know — for better penetration. So whatever you run into — armor — glass — walls — you're all set." He raised his eyebrows. "You like?"

"My," said Nyssa, twirling a black arrow between her fingers. "You're a clever one, aren't you? Did you go to this — MIT — as well?"

"Calt— whoa —" Cisco practically slid off the table in his eagerness to get Nyssa's attention. Oliver caught him by the elbow and hauled him back upright.

Cisco patted down the front of his shirt, his face flushed. "I — uh — went to C-Caltech. Class of 2010. You could say that I was — uh — quite the ladies man in jazz band."

Nyssa only raised a dark eyebrow, and Cisco looked like he was going to break his jaw from smiling. Oliver cleared his throat, loudly. "So you're clear on what you have to do?"

Cisco gave a thumbs-up. "Stick with Nyssa and try not to talk."

"Good," Oliver said, looking over his shoulder — at the new arrival. Felicity was leaning across a table and talking to Laurel while Caitlin swabbed her forearm in preparation for the injection. "I'll be — back," he said, absently, moving towards them.

"I left Ted at the gym," Laurel explained, as Caitlin prepared to inoculate her. "I'll swing by later to pick him up and the — um — Flash can tell me where to meet him."

Felicity winced as the needle went into her forearm, but Laurel kept talking. "So — how's everything going?" She was staring at the flickering overhead light, Barry's misfired arrow sticking out from it like a bizarre ornament.

"It's all hands on deck," Felicity said, stating the obvious. "We're mixing ARGUS with League of Assassins, which might be a disaster waiting to happen —"

"—but I'm sure it'll be just fine," Caitlin said, with a tight smile.

"We've faced worse," Laurel agreed, firmly. "We can get through this."

Felicity looked up and saw Oliver coming over. "Uh-oh," she muttered. "Angry-face."

She hastily came around to the other side of the table to intercept him. "Laurel's here," she said, unnecessarily.

"I see that," said Oliver, and she could tell that he was resisting the old impulse to keep Laurel out of the Foundry — i.e. out of everything Arrow-related.

Since Laurel's back was to Oliver, it meant that Felicity had about two seconds to telegraph a wordless *be nice* with her smile.

Because she of all people knew that Oliver and Laurel went way back, with a shared history beyond what she'd been told, more than she'd ever know — the kind of history that came from being both
old friends and past lovers.

Even though she knew — or assumed, at the very least — the romantic part of their relationship was over, the crime-fighting-partnership-aspect of it was still surprisingly rocky terrain. They were remarkably similar in temperament — especially when challenged — and had a near-identical tendency towards stubbornness. The pigheaded kind of stubbornness that led to inevitable my-way-or-the-highway-type confrontations.

And today — of all days — was not a falling-out day. Laurel was going to help them with the war on the surface, leading a contingent of ARGUS backup alongside Ted Grant and Barry (The Flash to her, Caitlin's thing about secret identities) to help reduce the level of damage the League could do on the streets.

Felicity gave Oliver a silent look, and felt him respond with a squeeze of her hand. He probably didn't remember what Laurel said — way, way before — about punching him for joining the League.

She hoped.

"Laurel," he said, awkwardly. "Thank you for coming."

Laurel was beautiful — gorgeous — even without a smile, but not smiling made her look like the steely-eyed attorney and the woman who hunted down the vigilante two years ago. And for a second, Felicity was so worried that she'd react — totally understandably — the way Felicity wanted to, when Oliver first dropped everything and joined the League.

Anger.

Lots of it.

Of the boxing variety.

But then she smiled, slid from her chair — and hugged Oliver.

"Hi, Ollie," she said, softly.

Felicity breathed a silent sigh of relief at the nuclear disaster averted. A good sign. Maybe things would start going their way after all.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, so it's 3x10 in a few hours and we're all probably going to die. Yayyyyy.
Oliver found himself watching Felicity — again — even though she was across the room, even though he was meant to be preparing for war.

"I still owe you a punch, you know," said Laurel.

Oliver cleared his throat, and turned back to her. They were sitting at one of the worktables, a little out of the way so they could talk. He was meant to be sifting through arrowheads, picking the ones he wanted to take with him.

"I promise that you can hit me when this is all over," he said, slipping an explosive arrow into his quiver.

Laurel smiled like she could see his distraction — and was amused by it. "Three years in the making," she said, drumming her fingers on the table. "You and Felicity."

Oliver looked at her in surprise.

"Dig might have mentioned it," she said, resting her chin on her hand with something resembling smugness. "Also — I have two functioning eyes, and I spent a lot of time with your friends while you were gone."

Oliver shook his head at the mental image of Diggle gossiping. Unfortunately — it went both ways. "What about you and Ted?" he asked, and smiled when she was visibly taken aback. "John knows everything."

"All right," she said. "But I think we can agree that after one year with the League of Assassins — you still suck at lying."

Laurel tilted her head with a small smile, her gaze following Oliver's. Felicity was standing at the computers with Cisco and Caitlin, dividing her attention between rapid-fire typing and what Cisco was saying. She glanced up at something he said and smiled, her face lighting up — like it was just another day at the Foundry.

Like they weren't about to fight a war.

"The Ollie I knew wouldn't have waited three years to be with a girl — he'd go up to her with a drink in his hand, at some smoky, seedy nightclub, and use one of the awful pickup lines his best friend didn't veto —"

"In his defense, Tommy was the witty one, I was the charming moron — we worked well together...and we were idiots." Oliver had to laugh at the memory of his twenty-something-year-old self, making trouble with Tommy by his side, and Laurel to disapprove of what he'd done over their hangover breakfast the next day.

"But you're different now," Laurel said, softly, like she was remembering the same things, missed the dear friend they'd both lost. "A fresh start with someone who knows you — and loves you all the same. That's — something. She's — something."
Oliver shook his head, jarred by the novelty of it all. It was a position he'd never thought he'd have to consider — discussing Felicity with Laurel Lance, a woman he'd cheated on repeatedly, with her own sister, and other women. Put simply, Laurel was the woman who knew Ollie the best — the callous, selfish boy — and loved him, because they'd grown up together.

But that Ollie was gone, and they both knew it.

The Oliver that'd come back from the island barely resembled the Ollie that boarded the Queen's Gambit. He'd carried his secrets, secrets he'd never shared with Laurel — not even his identity as the Arrow. That had been Slade's doing, and had he been given the choice, Oliver wasn't sure he would have wanted to drag Laurel into his darkness again — because she had her own darkness as well. Their individual worlds were already too complicated — too dark and too broken. They both had their demons, and if they'd tried again, after the island, Oliver knew now that they would have torn each other to shreds, one way or the other.

Laurel was still watching Felicity. "I can see why you told her — from the start I mean." There wasn't any malice in her tone, or jealousy. She was stating the obvious, saying what was on her mind. "She's been with you since the beginning, right? When you were the Hood. Until you gave yourself up to the League — and even then, she didn't give up on you. Not for a second."

Oliver hesitated. "Laurel — you don't have to talk about this if you don't want to —"

"Ollie," she said, firmly. "Ted and I don't need your blessing, and you and Felicity don't need mine — but this is me giving it anyway. A long overdue one. We're both with different people now, and I think we can both agree that we...outgrew each other. The old you never came back from the island, and I mourned him, but I moved on. Now I want us to be friends, and that means I get to say whether I like your girlfriend or not. And I do. So this is me telling you to be happy."

"Laurel..." Oliver said, still surprised at the truth in her words — what he'd thought but never said, now out in the open. A new feeling, considering all the lies that'd been floating between them since he came back from the island. "You don't owe me anything — not after what I put you through, not after all the secrets I never told you. I want you to be happy with Ted, and I couldn't be more glad that you are, but I think we both know that I don't deserve your blessing."

Laurel reached out and took Oliver's open hand in hers, her fingers steady and perfectly balanced. Hands that were stronger than he remembered, forged into iron by loss and heartbreak.

"Ollie," she said. "A friend I made recently told me that we have to love our families — no matter what — and I do. You're my oldest friend — you're family — and with all of this happening right now, I want you to know how important you'll always be to me."

In his history of relationships, romantic or otherwise, loose ends were something that Oliver knew by heart. But when looked at Laurel, and more than ever he felt the door closing on the past — the shared history of pain and heartbreak that they were finally putting behind them.

Closure.

Oliver put his hand on Laurel's. "Family," he said, softly. "Always. Whatever you need — I will be there."

"One more thing," Laurel said, leaning forward. "I want you to remember something, when you go out there today, as the Arrow. I want you to remember that you have so much to live for — that you have a life waiting for you in Starling City...remember that, okay?"
There's one thing I'm going to promise you, and I hope that you'll promise me too. Anything.

Oliver looked at Felicity, and felt himself smile — in spite of it all, in spite of the war they were about to fight.

"I know," he said. "I made a promise."

Felicity couldn't put it down — the sonic device. The Canary Cry, as she was starting to call it (just in her head). Even though there was a 30% chance it'd go off if her uncoordinated hands dropped it, she kept rolling it between her palms like it was a stress ball. A stress ball that would bust everyone's eardrums if she squeezed, but still.

The waiting was just about going to kill her.

Roy was punching a sandbag. Barry was fidgeting with the bowstring. Cisco was endlessly dismantling and reassembling a weird cube-shaped thing with a smiley face on the side. Caitlin was sitting as straight as a poker.

Diggle and Lyla had gone to round up ARGUS agents willing to help them — agents who would justifiably be cagey about their leader Amanda Waller and their colleagues getting their heads cut off by a psychotic terrorist group.

Even though Lyla was technically supposed to be highest in the chain of command, apparently the US government had something to say about who held the top seat in ARGUS, and they hadn't spoken. So Lyla was in the gray area between jobs, her acceptance dependent on inner ARGUS politics.

Who were they kidding — it'd be a miracle if even half the number they expected even agreed to come, STAR Labs tech or not.

"Your friends have failed," Nyssa declared, ever the optimist. Her boots clacked against the concrete as she paced, and Felicity knew that any minute she was going to whip out her sword and start swinging.

"They haven't," said Oliver, leaning on the back of her chair.

She only had to glance up and see his thumb and index finger chafing — nervous. Good God, Oliver was nervous.

Felicity heard her phone go off and snatched it up. "Oh thank God," she said, but all it read was — NEWS. NOW.

Cue sad whistle noise.

"Dig says to turn on the news," she said, nonplussed.

Oliver looked as puzzled as she was, but she reached for the keyboard anyway. A few quick taps brought up Channel 52's news coverage on the many monitors — undoubtedly more Terrorist Watch 3.0 —

"Frack," said Felicity, when she saw the picket lines and, as the camera panned through the crowd — the signs.
"They want the Arrow." Felicity turned to look at Oliver, meeting his stunned gaze with her own. "They want you back."

Apparently, the rumors she'd spread to try and throw Ra's al Ghul off Oliver's scent — they'd gained traction as soon as the ARGUS bodies dropped. Spreading like wildfire, from nerd-rage message boards to sketchy blogs, to less sketchy news sites — until the people reading them took to the streets.

Converging in the center of Starling were the people who lived in the city, people who still remembered the Arrow, and remembered the two terrorist attacks they'd survived with his help.

But Felicity still couldn't process it.

After years of living in darkness and fighting after nightfall, it seemed impossible that there'd be a rally for the Arrow — in broad daylight, and on live television.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" Oliver's question was directed at Laurel, as they watched Captain Lance make his statement on live TV — in support of the Arrow.

Laurel looked as shocked as they were. "My dad has no idea that I'm helping the vigilante," she said, staring at the monitors.

"I told you." Barry had crossed the slack-jawed phase faster than any of them and was grinning like crazy. "I said you could inspire people! Look at this! Do you know what this means?"

"Numbers," said Caitlin. "If the SCPD are fighting with you on ground-level —"

"—then you can take the ARGUS agents underground to meet up with Nyssa's faction," Felicity finished, looking at Oliver. "We'll have twice the numbers we thought we'd have."

Oliver folded his arms. "No."

The hopeful atmosphere took a rapid one-eighty.

Felicity covered her face in silent frustration. Oliver Queen and his all-encompassing decision-making. When it came down to it, the one thing Oliver had to be reminded of, time and time again, was that people were free to make their own decisions. And it was nobody's business to tell them otherwise.

"Why not?" Barry asked. "Do you know what it means if the police are willing to stand with you? It means —"

"—that innocent people — including Quentin Lance — are going to risk their lives in a fight that isn't theirs." Oliver's voice was methodically calm as he slashed right through Barry's enthusiasm. "I can't let that happen."

"Oliver," said Roy, placatingly. "You're fighting to save Starling — but it's their city too. We can't
"We can't inoculate the whole city," Oliver said. "What if the League releases the fear toxin on them? Or takes them as hostages? We should be getting people to stay inside — not take to the streets. Laurel —" He turned to her, as if it was the end of the discussion. "You need to call your father, and tell him to instate a curfew. Get everyone inside, and tell them to —"

She didn't flinch. "No."

Oliver was practically glaring at her. "Laurel —"

"When Slade's men took over the city you had SCPD's help, and you won because you weren't working alone. Now Starling City's joining your fight — to help you. Why would you send them packing?"

"Because it's dangerous," Oliver said, his voice starting to shake from an explosion Felicity knew was coming. She rose from her chair, silent and unseen. "Because it's not their fight. Because I'm supposed to protect them —"

"Oliver," she said, but he didn't hear her.

"— and not let them take the risks that I'm supposed to be taking on, by myself. Because —"

"Oliver!" Felicity shouted.

Silence.

Oliver faced Felicity, his shoulders as rigid as iron, his eyes blazing dark blue. "What?" he asked.

"First of all — how is the decision they're making any different from the one we made when we decided to fight?" Felicity asked, with careful calm.

Oliver was practically nose to nose with her, and what little space between them bristled with two clashing ideas — two very different ways going forward. She'd assumed Laurel and Oliver would be the nuclear bomb in the team.

Ironic how she seemed to have taken over that position.

"Because we know the risks that we're taking, and we've accepted them. We know what the League can do, and we're fighting so that they" — he jabbed his finger at the screens — "don't have to."

"A few thoughts — these people can make their own decisions, Oliver, and they did. They're choosing to stand with you — with the Arrow. Because you represent something they want to fight for. Bravery. Justice. Good. The kind that scares off people like Malcolm Merlyn — psychotic genocidal murderer, Slade Wilson — ruthless mercenary hell-bent on destroying Starling City — and Ra's al Ghul — assassin, tyrant, mass murderer."

Felicity said exactly what was on her mind, careless of the landmines about to go off beneath her feet, because she needed him to understand. For once in his life — to understand the sacrifices made by people who weren't him.

"They're risking their lives," she said, softer now, "and I know you don't want them to. None of us want them to. But we all know why, because we're doing it for the same reason. Because the city needs saving — and you have to accept that you've changed them — that you've started something. Now people don't want to sit at home and let someone protect their city for them. They want to fight
with you, fight for their home."

Felicity took a shuddering breath.

"It's out of your hands now. And I don't care if you boycott the whole thing — I'll put Barry in the suit and send him out there — but you need to accept that other people have chosen. That we've all chosen — chosen to fight. So are you in, or are you out?"

"For the record," said Barry, standing behind Felicity with his arms folded. "The Oliver Queen I knew wanted to inspire people, and there's no way he'd be pissed if he actually did. So I'd be pretty bummed if you wanted out, but I'd totally pretend to be you."

And for once, he looked pretty convincing in the old Arrow suit.

Until then, Nyssa had been utterly — eerily — silent. Perched on a table, taking everything in with her all-seeing dark eyes. But she slid suddenly from the table she'd been sitting on, and landed with a thud that made them all look around.

"Oliver Queen," she said, her voice a ripple of authority. "I cannot pretend to have the fragility of your conscience, but you do realize that this is the desired outcome your boneheaded crusade, do you not? A city of warriors will not fall easily to the Demon, so choose wisely." Her lips curled. "And soon. We have a war to fight."

Felicity watched Oliver — a man she knew, a man she loved, regardless of how stupid and how stubborn he could be — praying that he would make the right choice. That he would understand.

That it wasn't a liability, or a risk.

It was Starling City recognizing all he'd done and all he could do to save the city. It was the might of Starling City's fears and hopes — all behind the vigilante called the Arrow. Because they believed in him, during a time he needed it most.

Oliver's eyes flickered open, clear bright blue.

"Let's move," he said. "We have a train to catch."

Chapter End Notes

OK, a few things.

(1) Hahahaha got some of my exam results back and guess who got 2:1 and a 1st (triumphant flail dance in the background). Granted, the two papers I hated the most I still haven't got back yet, so the next end note could be me dying silently from shame. But anyways yes-yes-yes I can totally balance writing fic with law school. Yesyesyes. Sorry 'bout that sudden rant.

(2) This chapter was my chance to write a Laurel/Oliver closure scene, because personally I think their love story is just too dark and pardon my French, but Oliver slept with Laurel's sister, and (as someone with a female sibling of her own) I think exchanging bodily fluids with sisters is pretty much the final nail in the Lauriver coffin. But that's just my opinion. (And Captain Amell's - the gist of which I have heavily paraphrased) It also doesn't mean I don't want Laurel and Oliver to stay friends.
(3) When Slade's Mirakuru Men were taking over the city, yes, Oliver did accept the SCPD's help then, but I think his reaction here is pretty much an instinctive reaction of disbelief that Starling City WANTS to fight alongside the vigilante. 'Course, it made sense in my head so maybe it comes off as out of character for you.

(4) 3x10 is going to make me cry. And frantically write more chapters.

Cheers. Sorry for that rant.
My name is Barry Allen, and I am the fastest man alive.
—except when my friend’s old suit is giving me a wedgie.

"Felicity!" he shouted, over the wind. "I can barely run in this thing!"

"You're doing fine," she said, her tablet making clicky typing noises in the background. "It's just nerves — frack-you're-about-to-miss-it — take a right!"

Barry tailspun so fast that he almost face-planted in a brick wall. He skidded into a dead-end alley with a blast of fallen leaves and street litter.

"Too close," he panted.

"Sorry, I'm multi-tasking — Cisco's driving might actually be worse than that plane I took to Lian Yu."

"What?"

"It's a long story." She cleared her throat. "Use the fire escape to get up on the roof."

Barry put one foot firmly behind him, digging his shoe into the ground like he was about to start a sprint. He’d done this before — racing up a skyscraper, Looney-Tunes-style — so a three-story brownstone was no biggie.

And to paraphrase Caitlin’s helpful advice — he just had to run fast enough.

"Barry?"

"In a sec," he said, and took off with a burst of lightning.

It'd taken him a while to get used to the sensation of super-speed, the feeling of taking a step forward — expecting everything around him to stay exactly the same, plus or minus a foot — and suddenly bursting into a completely new place, hundreds of feet away from where he'd started. All in the leisurely space between seconds.

It was insane.

It was impossible.

It was completely, utterly, and irrevocably awesome.

Barry sucked in the fresher air that came with standing on top of a building, feeling his lungs thrum with the inevitable exhilaration that came from using his super-speed. It was like an adrenaline rush
"So why am I standing on top of a building, dressed like Oliver?" he asked.

"Because I got a hit off facial recognition, and there's a scouting party headed your way." She took a breath, like the next part was going to be hard to say. "I need you to steal their clothes."

"Who in the what now?"

Barry thought a bug had gotten caught in his earpiece again (fourth time that month). He tapped it a few times. "Did you say clothes?"

"Yes," Felicity said. "Their robes — Barry — their robes."

Barry had a problematic attention span — as Joe liked to point out — but he explicitly recalled nobody saying anything about stealing robes. Just that he'd have to shoot a bow and arrow and look convincing.

"Why?"

"Look, they're headed your way. Use the knockout gas Cisco gave you — what? —" Barry heard a minor scuffle on Felicity's end, and winced from a sudden blast of Cisco perkiness, like he was holding the mic too close to his mouth. "It's the Rubik's cube — the one with the smiley face — THE ONE WITH THE —"

Barry winced at a muffled thud, and Felicity's voice was back on the line. "—He knows, Cisco. Use the knockout gas and net them. Leave the robes on our route and we'll swing by to grab them."

"I thought I was just supposed to draw the scouts away from the bunker? Since when am I supposed to —"

"—Barry, we're wasting time." It could have been him, but Oliver sounded a smidge more irritated than usual (which wasn't saying much). "We need the disguises."

"What is wrong with you?" Barry said, fumbling around in the many pouches on the Arrow suit, searching for the smiley-face-knockout-gas. "You could have just told me the plan."

"Roy said you were already freaking out about the bow and arrows," said Felicity, less apologetically than he would have liked. "We didn't want to give you another reason to wig out on us."

Barry crouched by the edge of the rooftop, craning his neck to see the street below. "You are going to owe me so much for this."

Oliver sighed. "If we all survive this, Barry, I'll buy you lunch at Big Belly Burger, okay?"

"Make that eight hundred and fifty burgers, extra pickles — and you've got a deal." Barry crawled forward on his elbows, holding the smiley cube in his fist.

"Ten o'clock," said Felicity. "Do you see them?"

Barry sighed. "I see them."

Felicity heard that people had a tendency to pick fights before a big goodbye — to make it easier. Saying goodbye was supposedly easier on the feels when you wanted to claw someone's eyes out.
But she didn't have time to be pissed at Oliver. A certain twenty-six-year-old lightning bolt was whizzing his way around the city in a borrowed suit, pretending to be the Arrow.

Also, they were being driven around the city by the very personification of dangerous — and sober — driving. If she had a penny every time her heart slammed into her chest from sudden braking, she'd have the doubloons to buy a rare Spanish antiquity — *holy frack* —

The van finally screeched to a halt — with the smell of burnt rubber — and Felicity could feel her heart in her throat. At least she hoped it was her heart, and not something gastric-related.

"You okay?" Oliver's mouth was next to her ear, and she realized that she'd slammed right into him when the van braked.

She looked up into his face and nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Partly because she wasn't sure if she was about to throw up. Partly because she wasn't sure if they were still in disagreement-mode over the city.

Cisco turned in the driver's seat.

"Everybody okay?"

Felicity slid off Oliver's legs, doing a quick check of the van. Caitlin — sitting in the front seat — looked like she'd seen worse driving, while Roy looked like he was going to kill something — which was how she knew he was okay. Nyssa, on the other hand, merely brushed a fleck of lint from her cloak.

"Your friend is a sublimely terrible driver," she said, resting her hand on her sword. "Perhaps he ought to —"

"Barry!"

Caitlin was the first one out of the van. Felicity threw open the back doors and followed her into the dark. They were in an abandoned QC lot near the edge of the city — which meant no lights.

Except one.

Felicity focused on the streak of light in the not-quite-distance, but she still threw her hand up when it exploded into a blinding glow — revealing an Arrow-suited Barry, holding a bag of clothes.

"Done," he said, triumphantly.

Oliver caught the sack with a grudging smile — his usual. "Thank you, Barry."

"You're a lifesaver," Felicity added, mentally measuring the size of the robes. They'd need to fit someone pretty big, and nobody here (she guessed) knew how to sew.

Barry grinned. "Anyone else need a disguise?"

Oliver shook his head. "This is it," he said, quietly. "We're heading down into the bunker."

A long pause ensued, because everyone was just then realizing that it was their chance to say a goodbye. To give the cheesy movie speech and blink back tears.

But unlike the movies, there was a very real chance that some of them were going to get hurt. Barry was the first to move. He pulled Caitlin in for a hug, saying something too soft for the rest of them to hear.
But it made her laugh.

"Be careful," Caitlin said, pulling away to rub a smudge from his jaw. "I'm going to be too busy to patch you up."

Felicity realized it was probably her way of saying goodbye. Cisco was next — prodding and fiddling around with the Arrow suit, muttering to himself while he checked and re-checked the gear stuffed inside the pockets. It reminded her of a parent sending their kid off to preschool.

God, the world where Cisco was acting like the parent.

"You can do this," Cisco said, patting Barry on the shoulders. "Feel the speed. Feel the wind —"

"—beneath my wings?"

They cracked up at the same time, and did one of the back-slapping male hugs that Felicity would never understand.

Roy — ever the gentleman — held out his hand to Barry. "Aim for the bullseye," he said, very articulately.

Barry chuckled and shook his hand. "How long you been working on that one?"

Then Felicity realized it was her turn. A very, very small part of her thought things would be weird between her and Barry, but their eyes locked and the almosts, the not-so-subtle advice and the very real closure passed between them like a hum of static.

Barry's smile was the same one she remembered from the train.

"Hey Felicity," he said, and she hugged him. Hugged him like she'd hug Dig or Roy — hugged him like a very dear friend she didn't want to lose.

"Be careful." Her voice came out muffled from his suit, and made them both laugh.

Finally — Oliver's turn.

He crossed the distance between them…and held out his hand.

A handshake.

Good God.

Felicity almost stepped on his foot right then and there. That's your friend fighting his first war, you emotionally constipated jerk. You go hug Barry. Now.

Suddenly, Oliver smiled.

"Eight hundred and fifty Belly-Busters, extra pickles," he said.

Then he hugged Barry.

Felicity honestly thought Cisco was going to die of joy — the Flash and the Arrow hugging it out — but he made do with a shrill noise (quickly cut off) that evolved into a face-saving cough. "T-time," he said, lamely.

Oliver nodded and looked at Barry. "We have to go."
"Try not to get hit by an arrow," Barry answered.

Felicity squeezed his arm one last time before she climbed back inside the van after everyone else. She looked out the back window as Cisco started the van — long after Barry erupted into a blast of light again, speeding back into the city center.

"My," said Nyssa, from her corner of shadow. "You all certainly take your time with goodbyes."

"You could have said goodbye to Barry too," Felicity said, as the light receded. "Since you skipped the thank-you-for-saving-my-life part to the choking-him-out phase."

Nyssa made a faint sound of amusement. "That one has the speed of Hermes. He risks far less than us common mortals."

"Mortal," said Oliver, "is not the word I'd use for you."

Nyssa's eyes glittered like a challenge. "Nor I you."

Felicity silently excused herself from the assassin double-talk and dagger-glares, digging through the sack instead. With an odd feeling of déjà vu, Felicity held up the mass of black leather and whispery fabric.

"I really hope this doesn't have bloodstains on it," she muttered, as the van jolted back onto the road.

Oliver knew what to expect. He'd been here before. Waiting for them was same ARGUS train that carried them out of the first crisis — left untouched in the covert underground station. As he descended into the familiar half-shadow, he felt the breath catch in his throat, his chest tighten — in some wordless response to the ineffable feeling of anxiety.

He was about to leave her — again.

Felicity's hair swung out behind her when she ran to hug Diggle, who was standing by the waiting train with Lyla — and an army of ARGUS agents.

More than they knew.

More than they'd expected.

The hood and mask shadowed Oliver's face, making it easy to hide his surprise.

"This is the Arrow," Lyla said, more of a symbolic gesture than from actual necessity. "He'll be leading the charge."

More than ever, Oliver felt the weight — of the mask, of the hood — when he met the stares of a hundred-over ARGUS agents. Some who knew his identity. Some who guessed. Some who didn't know — and didn't care.

Because they saw what he represented, not who he was.

A hand brushed against his. Small-boned, but never delicate. The back of her palm touching his, like she'd come to stand beside him.

Whether he wanted it to or not, he felt the tension leave his shoulders.

"Barry said you could inspire people," Felicity said softly, like she could tell what he was thinking.
"He was right."

Oliver turned his head towards her voice.

"Felicity —"

But she was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts on 3x10:

Well. I'm dead now. How's everyone else doing?
Roy and Digg - badasses.
Felicity - heartbreaking.
Oliver - alive (I'm going to kill him if he doesn't get his ass back to Starling).
Believe it or not, Laurel was actually pretty cool in that last episode. Kudos to the writers for figuring out how to write for Laurel Lance again (yayyyy)

But where did the sonic devices go to begin with - and why did they suddenly show up again? Whaaaaaat.
"This seems a little like overkill," Diggle commented, patting the layers of hardened leather armor that made up the League robes. The robes had come from someone with roughly Diggle's height and build, which was a good thing — he'd convince no one if he looked as uncomfortable as he felt.

"It's meant to be light," Oliver said, holding out the belt. "The leather allows for flexibility of movement — at the expense of protection."

Diggle chuckled in a moment of dark humor. "I'm guessing the only weapon I shouldn't worry about is a butter knife."

"I wouldn't know," Oliver said, with a flicker of amusement. "I'm light on my feet."

Diggle huffed, as if he was checking how much breathing room he had inside his dragon's hide. Meanwhile, Oliver glanced at the train. Felicity hadn't come out since they'd met up with the ARGUS agents, and Oliver knew he was meant to check on her, but between that and the last-minute preparation — there just didn't seem to be a moment.

"Everything okay?" Diggle asked, with a look that left no ambiguity about the subject matter.

"How—"

Diggle shook his head with something resembling exasperation. "You may not know this, Oliver, but I've done a pretty good job reading the both of you since day one. Why do you think I give such good advice?"

Oliver shot another involuntary glance at the closed train doors. "I just didn't expect it."

"What — that the city's following the Arrow's lead?"

"They weren't supposed to," Oliver said, flatly. "I didn't — I don't — want to start a movement. The risks I take, I take so that they don't have to."

"You know, that's the exact same reasoning that got you into this League of Assassins mess in the first place. The fact that you insist on taking on the danger for everyone else, and you forget that by putting yourself in danger, the people who care about you follow suit. One way or the other."

Diggle's tone wasn't accusatory — he never was. He'd always stated the facts as he saw them, straight and to the point.

And Oliver nearly always listened.

"But they're not you — or Roy — or Felicity," he said, quietly. "They don't know me — they shouldn't care —"

"They care about you, and what you represent to them. This is war, Oliver. Not just with the city, or with you — Ra's al Ghul's trying to tear down the Arrow's legacy and watch it burn. This is their way of showing solidarity — because even if they know just a fraction of what we do about the real threats they're facing — they believe in protecting a legacy of good, and they know that you can beat Ra's al Ghul. That's probably what Felicity — or Roy — would tell you in a heartbeat. If you listened."

Oliver looked Diggle in the eye and had to smile. "Always the voice of reason."
Diggle slapped Oliver on the back and stood back, shoulders straight. "Now, how do I look?"

They were almost there. The pieces were all tenuously coming together, the delicate chemistry of very different individuals with very different stories and strengths and skill sets — all coming together to save Starling City.

There was something beautiful about it.

But also something deeply terrifying.

Still, baby steps.

Not for the first time in her short life, Felicity was trying to puzzle out the various pieces that seemingly made up her disguise. League robes — all of them — really needed to come with instructions. She wondered if Diggle was having an easier time with his disguise — or whether it would fit the way Oliver's Arrow suit seemed to fit everybody but him (AKA, not).

"Come in," she said, absently, in response to the tap on the train door.

"Hey."

Felicity turned at the sound of Oliver's voice, instinctively clutching the robes to her chest before she realized that a) she was wearing a vest, and b) he'd seen her with a lot less clothes than she currently had on.

"Cisco's showing everyone how to use the tech," he said, as if in explanation, shutting the door behind him with a faint click.

Oliver in full Arrow gear (the hood and mask) looked a lot less happy than usual-Oliver, but she was used to that. She was also used to dealing with Oliver after one of their quasi-fights — with awkwardness and snark (The title of her autobiography).

The only place Felicity could change in (i.e. without windows) was the driver's compartment. Which meant that space was a lot more confined. She took a step back and almost knocked her tablet off the control panel, where it was silently reconfiguring the train's operation systems so she'd be able to run it remotely from the ARGUS bunker.

Simple stuff.

Felicity turned her back to him, fumbling with the robes while pretending to check the tablet. She'd made the mistake of stripping down to a tank top, which meant that her arms and shoulders prickled with goosebumps from the chill.

"I'll be out in a minute," she muttered. "I'm just reconfiguring the ATO so that I can run the train remotely — but that took forever because they decided to Kerberos-encrypt the train for some godforsaken reason —"

She stiffened in surprise, because Oliver's warmth was suddenly at her back, his arms coming around to encircle her. Felicity only belatedly realized it was a gesture of reconciliation when he pressed a kiss into her bare shoulder, and said, quietly, "I'm sorry. For losing my temper back in the Foundry."

"Which time?" she asked, and she was only half-kidding.

He sighed. "Every time."
"I know this whole...thing about the League of Assassins and being a symbol," she said, leaning her head against his, "I know it's got you freaked out. But it means you're doing something right, that you're being a hero. It just doesn't make sense to me how you don't see that."

Oliver's arms tightened, just a little. "It's my fault. I told you about the island, how I kept seeing threats and liabilities — even after I got back to Starling. I'm just so used to thinking of Starling as a city that needs saving —"

"— it never occurred to you that sometimes, people can save themselves?"

"The Hood was supposed to be a symbol of fear for the corrupt and the unjust. That was the point when I started out. I was going to be what they feared, what they ran from. I just don't know if I can be anything more —"

Felicity turned in his arms and reached for him, cupping his face beneath the shadow of the hood, making him look her in the eye.

"You're the Arrow now," she said, softly. "And you're not just about fear anymore. You're about true justice — courage — sacrifice — hope. You've come so far, Oliver, and I couldn't be more proud."

Oliver's eyes — a startling blue when surrounded by shadow — flickered across her face, and a small smile curved his mouth. His lips.

"I had help," he murmured.

Felicity slid her hands along the length of his face, over the planes and angles she knew, touching the man she loved — completely, and unconditionally. She didn't know who moved first, but it seemed to her like Oliver bent his head — pausing just shy of her lips — as if he was letting her choose. Whether she wanted to forgive him.

"We should go," she said, barely above a whisper — because she didn't need to say it louder.

"We should," he agreed, his eyes on her lips.

But neither one of them moved.

Felicity felt the hood slip as they kissed, backing into the wall until she felt cold steel knock against her head, Oliver — warm, solid — along the length of her body. They were running out of time — seconds racing towards the inevitable goodbye — and she wanted to lose herself in those precious minutes of hazy unknowingness.

But — always a but — nothing lasted forever.

"People — people — may I have your attention please?" Cisco called, waving his arms like a train conductor. "Please board the train with your designated bunker buddy and —"

"Cisco," said Caitlin, sticking her head out of the train. "Get in."

Felicity patted Cisco sympathetically on the back, tugging her ponytail from a snag in her collar with her free hand. Oliver watched as she hugged them both before hopping down to the platform, the folds of black billowing around her.

They were racing towards the separation — the only thing Oliver would have gladly forgone, even if
it meant he had to risk himself by taking Diggle's place. If it meant that he'd be by her side, that he could protect her with his own two hands.

Except Oliver knew the plan — because they'd gone over it, exhausting every possible angle except the one they'd chosen. But Felicity wearing League robes was a sight he'd never wanted to see again — not with everything Nanda Parbat symbolized, the injuries he'd accumulated during his year there, and every new scar marking her skin because of him.

But it was the plan. Always, the plan.

The rational part of him asserted its dominance. It made sense. What she lacked in combat, she made up for with a fearsome intellect, making her the only one who could take control of the bunker and make sure that they would have the advantage in a severely lopsided war.

It didn't mean he had to like it.

"Oliver," said Diggle, standing by an ever-watchful Nyssa. "Time."

The last agents were boarding the train, the doors hissing shut behind them, and soon it'd just be Oliver on the platform — along with the three going into the bunker. He was running out of time.

Nyssa rolled her eyes. "We waste precious time on your fragile conscience. I may be a phantom to my father's minions, but my faction will ensure that I come to no harm inside the bunker. Your companions will be safe with me. Play your part, and I shall deliver on my half of the bargain."

"If anything happens to them —" Oliver began.

Her eyes glittered. "Now why would I harm your little bird — when she so reminds me of mine?"

"Don't worry," Diggle said, his arms folded. "I don't trust her either."

At that, Oliver smiled, and held out his hand.

"John," he said.

They grasped hands, and nothing else needed to be said. He trusted Diggle implicitly to watch out for Felicity in his place.

Oliver stepped lightly onto the train, trusting that when he looked back, Felicity would be there. Always the first face he looked for in a crowd — and his last goodbye.

She looked smaller — wearing black, like the League robes swallowed her. Younger, somehow. But black brought out the vibrancy in her skin, the flush in her cheeks, the color in her lips. Oliver's gaze traced her features, as if he was committing it — again — to memory. They'd already had their goodbye inside the train for a reason, because there were eyes everywhere — watching. Even though they were helping Oliver in this fight, they still worked for ARGUS, and neither of them wanted the Arrow's reported attachment to show up on the radar.

"Here," she said, avoiding his eyes as she pressed an earpiece into his hand. "Everyone else has one — and I'm pretty much hacked into everyone's comms at this point — secure ARGUS — Barry's suit — SCPD —"

Excessive talking, Oliver realized, had always been her way of saying goodbye.

"Felicity," he said, slowly, "talk me in."
Felicity smiled a little as she slipped an identical earpiece into her right ear. "See you inside the bunker."

"I know."

But neither of them moved.

"I know what I promised," she said. "Go. I'll —"

Felicity ducked her head as the tunnel suddenly swelled with a gust of cold wind, blowing her hair madly around her face. A low murmur of surprise traveled the length of the train when the wind buffeted the inside as well, a microcosm of chaos.

"I'll see you soon!" Felicity shouted, over the wailing wind.

Just as she was about to step back, Oliver knew what he wanted to do in one exquisite moment of instinct. In the confusion, there were no watchful eyes. He gripped the edge of the door above his head and leaned out of the train, tilting her face up to his with the other.

One.

Their lips met with a shock of something wordless and incendiary. The same feeling that filled his veins with fire and the incontrovertible faith that he could fight the mounting odds and win — for her, and the life they could live.

The air around them was cold, but Felicity's breath — her lips — were very warm. A taste of home.

"I'll see you soon," he said, and backed away from the doors before they closed in a rush of air.

The last thing he saw was Felicity's blushing face and her smile.

_I'll see you soon._
"I feel like there's a song that describes this situation," Felicity said, as they crept — oddly, not for the first time — through a sewer.

"A sanitation hazard?" Diggle turned back to help her across a tricky patch. Unlike her, he seemed to be getting used to the disguise. Maybe it was the leather.

"I was thinking death-trap for the uncoordinated," she said, landing in a squelchy puddle she did not want to see up close.

"Are you quite finished?" said Nyssa.

"Not really," Diggle answered, hefting the canvas bag over his shoulder again. "How does this get us into the bunker?"

"The League has been in Starling City long before ARGUS ever built their little fortress." Nyssa's cloak whispered eerily in the near-darkness. "We know the labyrinth better than the beast itself."

"Fantastic." Felicity could hear the ingrained distrust towards Nyssa. "When you're done speaking in abstract metaphors, mind if you tell us how long we'll be inhaling toxic waste fumes?"

"Ask our Ariadne," said Nyssa. "She holds the golden thread, does she not?"

Now Nyssa was just trying to annoy him. But she did have a point, except Felicity had been trying not to breathe through her nose. "Right," she huffed. "Hold on."

The inside of the tunnel briefly glowed bright blue as she brought up the map of the underground tunnels beneath Starling.

"Okay, so this goes without saying, but we want to avoid active train tunnels," she said, more to herself than anyone else. "Nyssa — twelve paces and to the left. Dig — you take the right, seven paces. Make sure you activate homing mode — I'll need to have remote access inside the bunker."

"Copy that." Diggle lowered the sack carefully to the ground. "You know how to set charges?" he asked, handing Nyssa one of the bombs.

Nyssa tilted the steel disc in her hand, as if she was unimpressed by Cisco's printed smiley face. "Reasonably," she said. "Sara was a good teacher."

Felicity glanced up warily at the name, but Nyssa was already moving silently into the next tunnel.

"That one," said Diggle, reaching for an overhead pipe to lower himself into the next tunnel, "was not on me."

Felicity shook her head and looked back at the screen. They did make a weird team: Diggle with his unshakable practicality and ex-military expertise (guns, IEDs, basically modern things that went boom/bang/clap), Nyssa with her Greek-myth-speak, scary-sharp sword and hidden pockets full of deadly ninja stuff — and her. IT-girl-turned-vigilante-hacker, the unlikely glue holding a fragile alliance together.
Oh, and she was a bomber now.

Yay.

Yet another special skill to put on her overcrowded resume — soon to be in use after Ray Palmer fired his absentee VP. Maybe she could get a job with Nyssa's new League of Assassins, give them a little tech advice.

Maybe Lyla could come with her, since they were all basically going to be out of jobs soon. Assuming they survived this. Baby steps, baby steps.

Felicity stuck the bomb onto the slimy concrete wall, punching in the code sequence that turned the smiley face into a green frowny one.

Cheerful.

Along the tunnels they moved, setting charges as they went. It was more of a precaution than anything else, because according to Nyssa, the reason the League hadn't been sighted aboveground was because they knew their way around the labyrinth of abandoned/forgotten tunnels in Starling City, a maze that could take them pretty much anywhere they wanted in the city center, if they knew where to go.

Hence, the need to collapse the tunnels in case things got out of hand. The bulk of the fighting would have to stay inside the bunker.

"That's the last one," said Diggle, balling up the empty sack. "Are they all live?"

Felicity quickly scanned her tablet screen. "Yup. Operation Labyrinth complete."

"You've been hanging out with Cisco too much," he said.

"Quiet," Nyssa hissed suddenly, drawing up her hood.

Diggle immediately went to Felicity, crouching in front of her like he was a human shield. They were at the mouth of one of the diverging entryways into the bunker. Felicity pressed her lips together when she saw the first flicker of fiery light — and the shadows that lengthened along the sloping walls.

Nyssa's back arched as she stood, rising from the ground like some kind of watchful cat. Felicity saw the faint glimmer of her sword, heard the near-silent whisper of her sword sliding from the scabbard at her waist.

"Nyssa — Nyssa!" Felicity reached for her — but it was too late. Nyssa vanished down the tunnel mouth. Diggle pulled Felicity down after him, and they slid into the main tunnel with a splash of dark water, just in time to stumble on a very dead body — and the other half-kneeling with his head locked in Nyssa's arms.

She whispered something low in Arabic, her eyes blazing with fury, and snapped his neck with a twist of bone. The body splashed face-down, and stayed very still. The tunnel was filling rapidly with the smell of blood from the other body, the one Nyssa had left as a welcome mat.

"How did you know they weren't your allies?" Diggle demanded, as Nyssa bent over the corpse.

"Your speedy little friend forgot the weapons. " A pair of tomahawk axes flew his way. Diggle grudgingly shoved them into his belt. "And I knew, because when he saw my face — he called me
"sarab," she said, sliding her sword back into its scabbard. "Phantom. Those loyal to my father think I am dead — my faction alone knows that I am coming to relieve the Demon of his seat of power. Now — hide the bodies."

Felicity froze when Nyssa stepped towards her, but with a faint snick, she produced a short dagger, a curved steel blade. "Yours, Sa'ida."

"Are you okay?" she asked, watching Nyssa's face for any sign of pain.

"I trust you still remember how to use those shoulders," she said, in lieu of an answer.

Felicity nodded, and took the knife from her, sliding it into her belt. "Be careful."

Even though Nyssa didn't answer, it was a small comfort to see the little flicker of confusion that crossed her face, as if she couldn't understand why Felicity had chosen to worry about her.

Human.

That was what set her apart from Ra's al Ghul, and Felicity hoped she'd remember it.

"Stay silent," Nyssa repeated, a little unnecessarily. They were well within sight of the entrance, and the guards. Everyone — and really, everyone — had their hoods up and the black scarves drawn across the lower halves of their faces.

The entryway looked like some sub-sub-basement, the kind that tended to be buried and forgotten. But from the looks of it, they'd knocked straight through the concrete and bridged the underground tunnel to the bunker itself, forming an antechamber of sorts.

Felicity felt the tablet inside her jacket and the sonic device in her pocket like red-hot lead weights, like they were burning incriminating holes in her disguise. But Nyssa — swathed in a dark cloak — said something in conversational Arabic as she passed the guards, and bingo, it was like they'd stepped back inside Nanda Parbat.

In lieu of electricity (whoops) that Felicity had shut down, there were burning braziers and a whole lot of shadows in the underground bunker. She could tell that the doors had been manually pried open and left that way, the corpses she remembered from before all cleared away, the wall panels missing in some places — showing rough stone — as if the League was gradually making the conquered fortress their own.

The corridors were mostly empty, except for one or two assassins heading in opposite directions. They acted like the three of them didn't exist. Oddly enough, Felicity was fine with that.

Felicity was trying not to stare. "Where is everybody?"

"They say there's to be a gathering in the main hall," Nyssa said, under her breath. "My father wants to make a spectacle of it."

"Come again?" said Diggle.

"He gave Oliver Queen forty-eight hours to turn himself in to the League. That clearly has not transpired. As Oliver's time runs its course, my father wishes to make a public declaration of war."

Diggle made a faint noise that sounded like a skeptical cough. "You mean the bodies dangling from every building in Starling wasn't declaratory enough?"
Nyssa flicked a darkly challenging stare in his direction. "That was war against the Woman — which we won. Now it is war against Oliver himself, and the city he loves. The scouting parties my father sent out will be replaced by an army — one with orders to kill."

"Shocker," he answered.

"But," Felicity said, "that's why we set the charges. We need to get to the control room — ASAP — we need to use the stairs —"

She fell silent, because they'd reached the entrance to a cavernous hall — a very familiar sub-basement, a memory of death.

"First," said Nyssa, already staring at the faraway figure of Ra's al Ghul, standing against a column of dancing flames. "I must greet my dearest father."

"This wasn't part of the plan," Diggle said, through gritted teeth. They were one of the many assassins standing on the upper level, like the space below was the arena and they were waiting for the show.

"I know," Felicity muttered back. "But she's our hall pass."

They were trying not to be heard, which was easier than it sounded, because the hall was buzzing with talk — just not much they could understand. Diggle had a little bit of Arabic, enough to comprehend the conversations around them, but oddly enough — the language part of it didn't scare Felicity as much as the stabby-stab part of this severely uneven fight.

Nyssa's hands gripped the railing, perfectly steady as she observed the gathering of the League. Felicity wondered silently how many were in her faction, since all of them were dressed for war — obscured faces and hoods drawn up over their heads — one united front of trained killers that could decimate Starling City and raze it to the ground.

Happy thoughts.

*What would Oliver do?*

Simple. Oliver wouldn't have gotten himself into this situation. He'd be in the control room right now — shutting their little evil clubhouse down. Duh.

"You still got that Glock?" Felicity asked, out the corner of her mouth.

"Which one?" came the measured response.

A little bit better.

"He's not what I expected," Diggle commented. "I was expecting someone — taller."

Leave it to Diggle to be the only person unfazed by the claustrophobic gathering of hostiles all around. Felicity was practically hyperventilating, expecting them to be discovered at any minute. And she'd *been* in Nanda Parbat — their *actual* headquarters — for a week.

Ra's was a lone figure on the dais, facing the red flames burning inside the brazier. Her vision seemed to flicker with anger whenever she looked at him — like she was reminded of the horrors he'd inflicted on Starling City, the ring of bruises he'd put around her wrist, the way he'd abused Oliver and tried to brutalize his humanity. Felicity didn't lose control a lot, but when she looked at
Ra's, she was reminded of her promise.

That this would be the last war he'd ever fight.

Felicity felt her breath catch when Ra's al Ghul raised his hands for silence.

"Time," he said, in a hypnotic voice that carried, a voice that sent a chill down Felicity's spine. "The time — is almost upon us. I gave Oliver Queen forty-eight hours to turn himself into the League, to face justice for his treason, for his betrayal. That time has nearly elapsed, and still, there is no sign of the traitor. Yet I hear reports that the Arrow has been sighted in Starling City, and it is clear to me that Oliver Queen flouts the League's justice — that he has disregarded his oath of loyalty to the Demon, and betrayed the trust of our brotherhood. How shall we answer?"

Felicity jumped, her hand going to Diggle's — when the ground shook from a unified stamp, as if every assassin was standing at attention.

"I ask again — how shall the League answer?" Ra's roared, his arms aloft.

Every hair on her neck rose as the single cry rose from the mouth of every faceless assassin, soaring towards the ceiling like a flock of dark — and deadly — birds.

"What did they say?" Felicity whispered.

"War," Diggle answered, his eyes moving slowly across the room. "They said war."

"Assassins!" Ra's bellowed, and a silence fell once more. He turned towards the brazier, holding a hand over the licking fire as if he didn't feel the heat. "When the flames burn out — the last of Oliver Queen's time has elapsed, and we will raze Starling City to the ground. But if Oliver Queen is found — you are not to take his life by your own hand, or risk my wrath. You are to bring him to me. Now —"

Felicity tensed, and she felt the others' wariness as well — because they'd all heard the sound of a bowstring drawn taut.

A single arrow arced through the air and struck the flames inside the brazier — erupting twenty feet high — a roaring fire of pure, ghostly green.

"No," came the ringing answer.

"Felicity," said Diggle, as Nyssa removed her hood, baring her face for the room to see. She shook her hair loose, shoulders straight and proud, her eyes glinting like the black arrowhead trained on her father's heart.

"The Heir has returned," she said. "Father. Did you truly think I would descend into purgatory without taking you with me?"

Felicity felt the air sharpen, taking on the acuity of a hundred razor blades, as the two opposing leaders looked each other in the eye — forcing everyone in between to choose.

Ra's al Ghul's face was as pale as bleached bone.

"Nyssa," he said, as if in belated recognition of the daughter he'd killed.

Nyssa's breath hissed between her teeth, and beside her, Felicity felt Diggle reach for his gun.

"To battle," she said, and all hell broke loose.
Chapter End Notes

Everything goes to s**t again. Sorry guys.
Well, there was good news and bad news.

Good news — Nyssa did have supporters willing to risk their necks for her.

Bad news — it was so hard to tell them apart that she wasn't sure who was fighting who. Also — declaring war in a super-confined space with limited exits equaled bloodbath.

Then again, it was only the first ten minutes in.

Felicity ducked as an arrow embedded itself in the wall above her head. She really needed to get inside the control room. Even if she had Wi-Fi, it was completely useless as long as the ARGUS systems remained — well — completely and utterly blank.

Guilty.

Ra's was nowhere to be found — at least in the writhing sea of fighters, most of which were actively taller than Felicity was. She tried to find higher ground, but that seemed to attract an abundance of homicidal attention, so she kept to the floor.

The Canary Cry almost rolled away from her when she first got it out, which would have been an absolute nightmare to retrieve — especially since the firelight made the room look like the badly-lit set of some B-list period drama.

Felicity yelped when an arm descended around her throat, hauling her straight off her feet with brute force. Blood rushing into her head, lungs struggling for breath — not pretty. She knew it wasn't strictly in the usage manual, but she reached up anyway and slammed the sonic device into the side of her attacker's skull.

A few excruciating seconds later, Felicity's ears were ringing and she could breathe again.

"Frack," she coughed, staggering to her feet. Her attacker was on the ground, probably with a busted eardrum or two. It certainly felt that way to her, and she had a high-tech version of sonic earplugs to protect her hearing.

A gunshot went off over Felicity's head, another close shave lost in the total chaos that was the main hall. It took her a second to regain her bearings, to see that Nyssa was a few feet away, fighting so furiously that her sword was just a flash of steel. When she spun around in the center of the fray, her blade left a streak of dark red in her wake.

"Dig!" Felicity saw Diggle grapple — briefly — with a hooded assassin before slamming him so hard into the wall that the impact had to have cracked bone.

He kept a firm hold on Felicity, and rounded on Nyssa. "That was your brilliant plan?" he demanded. "Declaring war before anything else? Really?"

Instead of answering, Nyssa swung her sword into an assassin's bow, snatching the loaded arrow in her gloved hand and jamming it into an eye socket — all in one unbroken motion. She turned to them, triumph (which, by Felicity's definition, was putting it in very loose terms) blazing in her black
"If no soldier was willing to follow me, their general — this stratagem would have been a lost cause anyway," she said, bluntly. "Clearly, that was not the case."

"Dig — behind you!"

Felicity yanked Diggle out of the way before an axe crashed into the ground between them and Nyssa. For a second, neither of them moved.

"Holy fr—"

Before the assassin could remove his weapon, Diggle stomped on the axe and slammed his gun into the side of his hood. Then he turned back to Nyssa. "That," he said, "is a load of crap."

"My faction will protect you," said Nyssa, tossing her head as if what he thought didn't bother her. "Get to the control room and bring our reinforcements. I will see to my father."

"If he's even still here," Diggle said, backing towards the staircase with Felicity just behind him.

Nyssa's faction had almost instantly formed a defensive perimeter around the staircase — and their way out. At first glance, it looked impossible to fight a war with two sides dressed in the same black, but Felicity was starting to see the red armbands against the black robes, a simple slash of color that identified their allegiances. Otherwise, this was just a great metaphor for how messy civil wars could get.

"The control room's one floor up," said Felicity, already pulling out her tablet. "I just need to get into their computers and —"

Diggle shot twice, dropping the two assassins rounding the corner. "I'm really starting to hate this plan," he said, heavily.

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Felicity yanked the stupid hood off her head and tugged the noose-like scarf away from her throat, balling and tossing it into a corner somewhere. She hated not having surveillance cameras. She hated not having electricity. A surprising amount of things she hated involved the absence of 21st century commodities, but that was neither here nor there.

Diggle was busy shedding the superfluous layers of armor as well, dropping parts of it as they went like some kind of video game. "At this rate," he said, fumbling with a particularly tricky lacing, "we'll all be dead before Ra's even gets a scratch on him."

"I'm tapped into the bombs." Felicity was typing one-handedly on her tablet, bringing up the map of the tunnels. Detonating in three — two —

There was a faint tremor beneath their feet, like an aftershock.

"And — goodbye escape route — hello, promising career in being a bomber," she said, slipping her tablet back under her arm. "Do you think we should call Oliver and let him know we're almost —"

Diggle rounded the corner and froze. Felicity looked out from behind him, and saw why. The way forward was blocked by a contingent of League assassins in full, scary black — and the Demon himself. From the looks of it, they'd left the main chaos in the hall and had been about to do...she didn't know — something evil. But just because they weren't expecting to see Felicity and Diggle did not mean they wouldn't kill them.
In other words, frack.

Ra's' sword — black as iron — glimmered like dark water as he stepped towards them. "I know you," he said, and his inhumanly black eyes were fixed on Felicity.


They heard the sound of a dozen drawn bows, and Felicity thrust the sonic device towards the assassins — the Canary's cry shattering the air around them as they broke into a run.

"They should be in the bunker by now," said Roy, in a low voice.

Oliver could feel the agitation in the air — nerves being stretched as thin as piano wire — the endless waiting in a confined space. Everyone was ready to fight, and Oliver knew firsthand that the waiting only made it worse. Lyla was moving between train compartments, keeping everyone calm while they waited for the train to start moving.

"It's only been —" He checked the time, "—two hours."

"Two hours should have been enough time for them to get through the tunnels."

Oliver shook his head at Roy's wordless question. "We're waiting."

"Maybe Cisco can get the train running from here and —"

"—then we'll just be waiting there instead. Either way, there's no difference," Oliver said, flatly. "We have to be patient."

Oliver could tell that the answer didn't do much to alleviate the tension, but he gripped Roy's shoulder in wordless reassurance and went to Caitlin and Cisco.

"Everything all right?" he asked, quietly.

Caitlin was packing away the last of the cure, stripping off her gloves. "Everyone on this train has been inoculated against the fear toxin." She was pale, the corners of her mouth downturned with worry. "Any word from Felicity and Mr. Diggle?"

Oliver shook his head. "They've gone dark."

"And you can't call them because you're worried her phone will go off while she's in disguise and she'll get caught..." Cisco trailed off at the sight of Oliver's face.

Caitlin patted Cisco's arm with an air of resignation. "Don't worry," she said, to Oliver. "I'm sure there's nothing to worry about."

Oliver nodded. "I appreciate that."

Cisco piped up. "You could do some tricks to keep everyone distracted? I think I have an apple somewhere — whoa —" He pitched forward when the train lurched suddenly, and the floor beneath them began to hum with electricity.

Oliver turned to the windows as the platform began to slip away — they were on the move.

"Oliver?" Felicity's voice came slightly frayed over the comms, but it was there. "Oliver — are you —?"
Out the corner of his eye, Oliver saw Roy sit up suddenly, as if he'd heard Felicity's voice as well.

Oliver swore he heard a muffled crash in the background, something heavy and solid.

"Felicity," he said, urgently. "What happened?"

"We ran into Ra's," she said, over the sound of rapid typing. Oliver shut his eyes briefly, fighting the panic that rose in his throat. "John's hurt — an arrow got him in the arm — we're in the control room right now, and they're trying to break down the door."

Felicity sent broken glass flying everywhere when she raced out from behind the computers, going on her knees beside Diggle. He was propped up against the shuddering door, clutching at a spreading stain in his upper arm — a long black arrow protruding from his shoulder.

"John — John —" She tried to stop him from getting a hold on the arrow. "Wait for Caitlin to get here — she knows what to do — don't —"

"I can't wait for Caitlin if they break down that door," he grunted. Felicity caught her breath when he tried to pull the arrow out again, but his hands came away dark with his blood. "My hands are too slippery — I need some cloth — something —"

"The door's heavy-duty reinforced steel," she said, bracing her hand against the cold metal as she tried to put pressure on Diggle's shoulder. "The only reason they got through last time was because they jammed it open. I've armed every door in the building — now I just need to find Nyssa on the surveillance, and we'll know how much the fighting's spread."

"Good — make sure you seal them inside a —" Diggle's face contorted in pain. "Seal them inside one area," he finished, breathing hard. "Do it, Felicity. Don't worry about me." The ghost of a smile flitted across his face. "I've had worse."

Felicity grasped the sides of his face, dangerously close to tears. She pressed her forehead against his. "Hang on until Caitlin gets here, okay?"

"Go — Felicity —" Diggle, ever the pragmatist, even when bleeding from an agonizing wound, only had the mission in mind. "Go."

Felicity stumbled back in front of the monitors and pulled up her chair. Computers were her thing, and the only reason Diggle got hurt was because she'd wiped the system to begin with. It was her fault. She should have been patched into the system from the start, she should have seen the danger around the corner.

All her fault.

Diggle had a wife, a daughter — family. Friends. She'd let him get hurt.

But there wouldn't be a next time. Fifteen minutes was a long time with a group of assassins trying to break down the door. She wiped her face on her sleeve and started to type — to process — to fight back.
Hey guys, sorry I'm late with updating, I've been trying to speed-write the climax in one go so I can tweak bits and pieces and make sure it all flows. My bad, should have warned you guys earlier.

Here it is — the (beginning/middle of) the final arc of the story. Now if you excuse me, I'm going to catch up on something called schoolwork and career crap, and maybe re-watch a few episodes of Outlander.

Side note: OMFG OLIVER'S GONNA DREAM ABOUT FELICITY ALL THE FIC POSSIBILITIES THERE (IT'S LIKE TROLLENHEIM'S TELLING THE FANDOM TO GO NUTS)
"What?" said Oliver. The agents were streaming ahead of him into the elevator, but he'd hung back with Lyla and the others. He'd been about to enter the elevator leading to the control room, to Felicity and Diggle. But it seemed that Felicity had other plans.

"Don't come," Felicity repeated. "Ra's wants you to get sidetracked protecting your friends. You need to join up with Nyssa and come down hard on him."

"You said they're trying to break down the door," Oliver said, dangerously.

"They're gone," said Felicity. "Finally figured out that reinforced steel isn't worth the trouble."

Oliver breathed a sigh of relief.

"No," she said, typing rapidly, "not good. Because that means I can't find Ra's. He must have put on a hood or something but —" She made a sound of frustration. "—he's gone. That is really starting to irritate me."

"I'll find him, Felicity," said Oliver, unsure whether her terrifying pragmatism was more unnerving, or her acute understanding of Ra's al Ghul and his ability to manipulate Oliver through the people he loved. "Don't go anywhere."

"I'm not exactly going to charge out with my profound lack of combat skills, am I?" she answered, sarcastically. "Since dangling myself out as bait is non-negotiable —"

"—correct."

"—then you'll just have to let Ra's al Ghul lead you down the rabbit hole. Figuratively speaking. Either way, I'm locking down the bunker and bottle-necking the armies into zones."

Oliver raised his head and met the curious stares of Caitlin and Cisco. They'd be going up to central command. Not him.

"Copy that," he said, flatly. "I'm sending Caitlin and Cisco up to you."

"Dig and the arrow in his shoulder can't wait," she answered, sarcastically.

"Felicity?"

Silence.

"Be careful," he said. "Ra's knows."

He didn't have to elaborate the what.

"You too. No stupid risks, okay? You don't heal as fast as Barry."

Oliver felt an unwilling smile cross his face. He adjusted his grip on his bow, and shifted it again.

"I'll see you soon."
"See you soon."

Diggle was hurt.

His friends were in danger.

But he couldn't afford to stop.

Felicity was right about his priorities. For once, she was seeing things in a more brutal light than he was. If they didn't stop Ra's today, there would be more casualties — strangers, friends…

This was the biggest force they were likely to raise against Ra's al Ghul, and the one most likely to beat him. A combination of modern-day warfare from ARGUS agents, and the lethal history of the League of Assassins — working together to stop a common enemy.

Oliver waited in tense silence as the elevator started to rise beneath his feet. Twenty ARGUS agents under his command, a war zone he'd have to clear.

Dozens of elevators were currently rising across the ARGUS bunker, reinforcements for Nyssa's faction. Roy was leading his own squad, somewhere across the bunker. Lyla too. All of them heading into the thick of the battle, with only one mission in mind. Find Ra's al Ghul.

He was the threat, he was the reason for the war.

At the back of Oliver's mind was a suspicion that the thick of the fighting wasn't where Ra's would be. He was too clever for that, too used to tiring out his opponents with distractions before he deigned to join the battle.

But if he wanted so badly to punish Oliver, he would want to join the battle and kill him with his own sword. Oliver wanted Ra's to make things simple. Face him in battle, and end everything, once and for all.

There was another consideration. If Ra's had seen Felicity — and known she was in the bunker… knowing what she meant to Oliver, he would attempt to obtain that leverage for himself. Another way to punish Oliver, to make him pay for his betrayal.

He couldn't afford to forget that.

Oliver lifted his hand to the controls — waiting for Lyla's mark.

"All squads stand by," she said, and he heard the click of her gun. "Three — two —"

One.

The doors rushed open to a cloud of black mist and lethal arrows embedding themselves in steel. As the fear toxin dispersed, harmless to the inoculated, Oliver rushed into the darkness and fired on instinct, like the League had taught him.

"Oliver left some of these," said Cisco, handing Felicity a fistful of arrows. They weren't color-coded, but they were filled with some kind of black sludge.

"Lorice arrows, really?" she said. Cisco really couldn't have picked worse timing to bring up arrows, what with the fact that their mutual friend was sitting on the floor, being patched up from an arrow wound that probably inflicted some significant muscle/joint damage. Felicity hadn't let go of
Diggle's hand through the whole thing, and her hands were all smeared up with blood.

"Not licorice," Cisco said, giving them a shake. "The fear toxin. Oliver took a couple of 'em, but I figured I'd bring a few anyway, just in case."

Felicity bit the inside of her cheek when Diggle groaned in pain, from Caitlin extracting the arrow with brutal efficiency.

AKA — yanking it out, band-aid style.

"I've seen her do worse to Barry," said Cisco, handing Caitlin the sterile gauze. "How you doing, buddy?"

Diggle cracked one eye. "Barry heals as fast as he runs. My superhuman regeneration is a little —"

He groaned again when Caitlin poured alcohol into the wound to sterilize it. "— rusty," he finished.

"Maybe I'll just —" Cisco stealthily put the arrows behind the desk. "— come back later."

Felicity resisted the urge to sigh at his phenomenally bad timing, even though she really wasn't in any position to judge.

"Can you raise your arm?" Caitlin's stare was laser-focused, like she'd been when Nyssa got injured.

Diggle shook his head. "Not without a whole lot of pain. But I can fire with my left hand."

"I can give you a sling," she said, already starting to measure one out.

"And a shot," he added. "Something strong. Please."

"Any sign of Ra's?" Diggle asked, as Caitlin strapped up his arm.

Felicity let go of his hand to check the computers. She was running facial recognition, simultaneously monitoring the countless skirmishes happening in the hallways, and the all-out war raging inside the base. And looking for Ra's — because he was unequivocally not in front of the doors, not anymore.

She shook her head. "No sign. He probably put on a hood — so facial recognition's a dead end."

"And Lyla? Oliver? Roy?" Diggle pulled himself to his feet, sweat beading on his forehead. "Are they safe?"

In the strictest sense of the word... no. Fighting a war was not safe.

"You can't go out there." Felicity came around the table, standing between him and the door. "A sling isn't bulletproof. What if someone shoots an arrow at you?"

"I'll duck," he said, flatly, reminding her so much of Oliver that she felt her stubbornness rise. "Felicity, I have to go out there. My wife — my brother — they're all fighting."

"Peer pressure," she said. "Bad reason."

A smile flickered across Diggle's face, and he pulled her in for a hug. "I have to do this. Talk me in — tell me where to go."

Felicity was getting very tired of seeing her friends walk away from her, walk out into battle while she stayed behind. But she knew that it was a selfish thought — just because she couldn't fight, and
some part of her hated that she was the only one on the team who couldn't.

And Diggle — unlike Oliver — was too smart to take her advice.

So she nodded, and watched Diggle lead the ARGUS agents out of the room.

"If you don't come back," she said, just before he disappeared from view, "I'll be pissed."

Diggle smiled at her as the doors hissed shut, and Felicity let out a deep breath.

"What now?" Caitlin asked, tentatively.

Felicity pulled her chair back in front of the monitors and sat down, doing the only thing she could when her friends went out to fight.

"We help," she said.

Felicity watched — tense with worry — as Diggle rejoined the battle in one of the zones. Her hands were practically raw from the chafing, and they still were nowhere near done.

She kept one eye on Oliver — her heart in her mouth every time he rushed into the fray, holding herself very still, her hands clenched into fists until she saw him again. He fought like he had nothing to lose, ferociously, recklessly — effectively. As little as she liked to admit it, his time in Nanda Parbat had changed his fighting style. Against the League, it was apparent that he could read their moves — fight like them, even — and it was working to his advantage.

She just hoped that those skills would matter. In the end. Against the Demon himself.

Somehow, she knew that Ra's would find him. He eventually would. There was no other way out of the bunker. They'd forced two opposing forces into a closed vessel — and sooner or later they would have to clash.

"Please," she said. "Please, Oliver."

*Be careful.*

"Felicity?" said Cisco. "Who's Maseo Yamashiro?"

She spun around, wide-eyed at the name. But Cisco was pointing at the computer screen, displaying a facial recognition match from a scan of the bunker surveillance.

"The prisons," she breathed. They'd turned the power back on — and that meant the lights in the prison were functional again, leading to an inadvertent match in the bunker-wide scan.

For a moment, she just stared at the unfamiliar Asian man, because she'd never actually seen Mr. Yamashiro, she'd only heard him talk about his dead wife. In a subterranean prison. Where he'd been put for killing said wife.

Oliver really needed new friends.

The Mr. Yamashiro in the picture was neat almost to the point of severity, with an impeccably straight stance and a direct gaze — a stereotypical ARGUS agent. If this was the man Oliver remembered, he wouldn't have believed her if she told him that he'd killed his wife. For sure.

"Cool ponytail," Cisco said.
"Not the point." Caitlin glanced at Felicity. "There are prisoners in the bunker."

"I know," she answered, her mind racing. "We have to evacuate them."

Caitlin was watching the screens as well. "We don't have the people — we can't pull anyone out of their zones."

"But the League might take hostages." Felicity was close to pulling at her hair.

"Do you guys not see the plan?" said Cisco, grinning from ear to ear. "We have the tech. We have the skills. We —"

"— no." Caitlin was already shaking her head. "No, no. No."

"This," said Felicity, "is not a good plan."

"Felicity," Caitlin answered, "you approved the plan."

Her voice was about an octave higher due to anxiety. And Felicity completely sympathized. Hacker, bioengineer and twelve-year-old were not exactly the most reassuring combination. They'd managed to scrounge up a handful of ARGUS agents, but other than that — they were dependent on locked-down zones and Felicity's grasp of the surveillance cameras to get them through without running into any League members.

"This is awesome," said Cisco, peering around the corner with the optical stun gun held aloft. "I feel like I'm on the Death Star."

"Seriously," said Caitlin. "How can you make a nerd reference when there are twenty highly-trained killers on the other side of that wall?"

Cisco looked at her like she was insane. "Because Barry would kill me if I didn't."

"Guys," said Felicity, hacking through another door. "Plan so close to falling apart here."

"Are we getting close?"

Felicity consulted her tablet. "Thank God that's a yes. If Oliver found out I left the control room, I'd be so dead."

Caitlin adjusted her grip on the stun rod in her hand, buzzing quietly from steady state of activation. "So have any of you given any thought to the possibility that these prisoners could be — I don't know — dangerous like the meta-humans in STAR Labs…or possibly just a smidge homicidal?"

Felicity decided not to say anything about Yamashiro's wife. She took them through another stairwell and stopped in front of the thick steel door.

"We're here," she said.

Chapter End Notes

3x11 tonight!!!!
For a long moment, Felicity had to mentally compare the Yamashiro in front of her and the one in the ARGUS database, because living in a prison cell for who-knew-how-many years probably hadn't done much for personal grooming, and his jaw was obscured by a black beard flecked with strands of gray.

He was younger than she thought he'd be — even with the beard. There were streaks of gray in his hair, but his skin was smooth and unlined. Put together, he couldn't have been older than thirty-five.

"Mr. Yamashiro?" she said, tentatively.

A flicker of recognition dawned on him, as if he remembered her voice. With measured slowness, he straightened up from his corner of the cell, and looked her in the eye.

"I thought you'd be dead," he said, bluntly. "How did you survive?"

"Uh," she said. "It's a long story."

He inclined his head. "And Waller?"

"She didn't make it."

Yamashiro's face didn't change. "Well," he said, flatly. "I hardly know you, so I think I'll dispense with the pleasantry of extending my condolences."

"You do know Oliver, though," Felicity said, with a little edge in her voice.

"Felicity!" said Caitlin, near the doors. "We're almost ready."

Felicity nodded, turning her head back to the computer. She needed to find and hijack the nearest elevator so that she could send the prisoners down to the train for evacuation.

"Did you tell him?" Yamashiro asked. He still hadn't moved from the corner. "About me?"

Felicity didn't look up. "He knows you're in the bunker," she said. "I told him that you defected — but I didn't tell him that you killed your wife. Oddly enough, I have a feeling that's something you should tell him yourself. If we all survive this," she added, because she couldn't help it.

When she looked up again, Yamashiro looked bemused. "You talk about Oliver as if you understand him completely."

Felicity had to smile. "Only most of the time."

Pain radiated along Oliver's arm from an old wound in his shoulder — recently reopened. But he blocked a sword swing on his bow, feeling his muscles drag and tear when he forced the sword away and kicked, gaining a few feet of space to shoot.

The assassin went down with three arrows in his stomach, and Oliver staggered, trying to keep his balance. He tasted death in the air and iron in his mouth, desperation pervading any sense of gain.
they might have had.

Without warning, cables looped around his wrists and ankles, slamming him onto the ground. His vision was momentarily blotted out by the jagged flash of pain, but he blinked it away to see four assassins standing around him, his executioner angling for the death blow. Oliver struggled against the bonds, but the assassin raised his sword high —

Warm blood splattered across his chest.

But it wasn't his blood.

Nyssa was barely recognizable in the fray of battle. She kicked the headless body out of the way and sliced through the cables with a shower of sparks, offering him a hand.

"How now, Oliver Queen?" she said, breathlessly. "You're losing your touch, I believe."

"Nyssa." Oliver grunted, and slowly got to his feet under her amused stare.

"I hope you're not beginning to realize your own mortality." Her eyes glinted. "Because I need you to do something for me."

"If it involves a blood oath," Oliver said, dryly, "I'm still in the middle of my last one."

"—Felicity!"

She paused, in the middle of hacking into the elevator system, her hand to her ear. "Oliver — I'm here."

For a few seconds she was silent, listening to his very weird request.

"You what?" Felicity thought she'd misheard him — over the sounds of gunfire and arrows and general warfare. "Did you say four?"

"Ra's has four assassins he keeps with him — at all times. They're his personal bodyguards, and wherever they are —"

"Got it." Felicity was pulling up the facial recognition. "Any descriptors besides black hood and carrying deadly weapons?"

Felicity could sense everyone staring — prisoners, ARGUS agents — wondering why she'd stopped mid-hack.

"Nyssa says that the four of them always fight together —"

"—what's up?" said Cisco, as if he'd been magnetically attracted by the words deadly weapons.

"—Cisco," Felicity said, holding up one hand.

"—they wear some kind of mask, supposed to look like oni —" Felicity flinched when she heard Oliver grunt from an attack, and the sound of an arrow puncturing flesh. "Search the battle zones. I need to know if I'm in the right place."

"I'll keep you posted." Felicity shut off the line and launched straight into a surveillance scan. "So, four crazy assassins wearing oni masks. Oo — tiny side note — anyone know what oni are?"
"Oni are demons," said Maseo. "Oliver is looking for four assassins wearing the mask of a demon."

Caitlin's eyes were wider than Felicity thought they could ever be, and Cisco almost jumped into the air. Maseo moved so silently that none of them realized he was standing behind them.

"Wait," said Cisco. "You know — he knows Oliver?"

Felicity shook her head. "Cisco — honestly, at this point — it's getting really hard to keep track about who knows whose secret identities."

"Felicity," Caitlin said, urgently. "We have to get them into the train."

"Right." Felicity nodded. She had to focus. One thing at a time. "Right."

Oliver fought — and fought — and fought. He knew adrenaline was preventing him from feeling fatigue, but it wouldn't last for much longer. They were closing in on the demon.

"Traitor," they hissed at him, circling like vultures.

He pitched forward to avoid a sword swing and came up the other side, firing a jettisoning arrow and stabbing another into someone's thigh.

Behind him, Roy disarmed an assassin with a succession of blows from the twin rods he was holding. Oliver heard the twang of a flying arrow and rolled instinctively to avoid it, but before he'd even raised his bow — two quick gunshots dispatched his assailant.

Diggle lowered his left arm. "Figured you might need my help," he said gruffly, seemingly unfazed by the tight sling binding his injured right arm to his chest.

"Wouldn't be a war without you," Oliver said, accepting Diggle's outstretched hand to pull him to his feet.

"Felicity said something about oni masks?"

Oliver pointed. On the dais, silhouetted against the roaring brazier, were four dueling shadows surrounding a lone figure.

Nyssa was a few feet away, Roy just behind them. Four of them, converged in the midst of battle. Oliver looked Diggle in the eye. "We end this," he said.

"So who gets who?" Diggle asked, as they approached the four guards. The fire gilded the iron masks with a merciless blood-glow, the fanged leer and protruding horns.

One of them had a steel-spoked whip, the other long razor-sharp claws, an impossibly long bronze spear —

With a wordless cry, Nyssa launched herself onto the tallest one, her sword flashing across the giant battle-axe in a shower of sparks. Undeterred by the parried attack, she somersaulted along his back and drove her sword straight through his skull, landing on her feet with feline grace.

"Father," she hissed, facing the hooded figure at the dais. "You have run from death for the last time."

Father and daughter raised their swords — together.
"Okay," Roy said, sounding deeply tired of Nyssa's habit of deviating from organized plans. He raised his bow. "I guess I get the guy with the whip."

Cisco raised both arms like he was directing a taxiing plane on the runway, ushering the prisoners into the elevator. Most of them gave him skeptical looks as they shuffled dubiously into the confined space. They'd have to go in turns — everyone couldn't possibly fit.

"Can you keep a secret?" Yamashiro asked, hanging back.

Felicity turned to look at him. They were away from the others, out of earshot. Perfect for some nut-job confessions.

"You really don't know me, do you?" she said, with a small smile.

Yamashiro was silent for a long moment, and she got the impression that he was making his own observations, his own calculations. Then, as if he'd reached a conclusion, he made a soft noise under his breath, almost a sigh.

"Waller is dead, and the only reason I kept the secret was to protect those I love. If Waller knew the whole truth, she would have hunted me to the ends of the earth and brought us both in."

"Us?" Felicity straightened up, not understanding. "But your wife — Tatsu — is dead. You killed her because she went mad after you brought her back using the pit. She tried to kill you and your son."

Yamashiro ran a hand across his jaw, his acute stare fixed on her. "I worked for ARGUS, Miss — Smoak, was it? That means I know how to read the person opposite me like an open book, unspool their brains like the code inside a computer, turn them into zeroes and ones — make the complex very, very simple. To tell a story people as skeptical of the mystical like Waller will believe. To lie."

"Well, you didn't pass that on to Oliver, did you?" Felicity said, unable to contain herself.

Yamashiro made a noise of amusement. "No, his stay was too short for that. But what I'm saying is — my wife is very much alive. And the pit did bring her back after she died. I know you don't believe me, so run your programs, track my wife down. I can tell you where she is — the island of Singapore — East Coast. She lives there with my son, Akio. But she was — is — very much living her second life."

Nut-job, ex-spy and liar would easily not win the award of Oliver Queen's Worst Friend. Nope, that dubious distinction was currently held by one psychopathic Slade Wilson — imprisoned in an ARGUS super-max on Lian Yu.

Yamashiro was just…weird.

But she'd run the program on the sly, hacking into satellites, running facial recognition on a photo of Tatsu from the ARGUS database. Bingo. Match. A woman who looked like her, very much alive, strolling through a marketplace as if there was only the sunshine and 98% humidity to enjoy.

"Why?" Felicity asked. "Why would you lie and say you killed her?"

"Because Waller knew how much I loved — love — my wife," he said, in a flat, practical voice she recognized from Oliver. "She knew that even the thought of killing her would have been so abhorrent to me, much less a lie and a prison sentence because of her death at my hands. Like I said,
Miss Smoak, I've been taught many things — and one of the weapons in my skill set is the knowledge of how to turn their prejudices and beliefs to my advantage. Waller believed me because I lied about the unthinkable, and Tatsu lives a peaceful life raising my son.

"Better I go to prison for the rest of my life than my son lose his mother to a faceless organization. They’d have cut her open, drained her blood, trying to analyze a secret that wasn't theirs to know. My wife alone possesses the secret of the Lazarus pits, and she passed it to me for safekeeping. Well —" He pulled his fingers into a closed fist, a gesture of finality. "Not that she remembers," he added, softly.

Felicity stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"We had no way of knowing, I — had no way of knowing. What the pit would do to her, when it brought her back. You see," he said, and moved closer, dropping his voice like he was telling her a dark secret. "The pit brings you back to life — yes — but to do that, it must know what binds you to the life you lost, the hold on your soul that prevents it from slipping away. It finds the tether," his fingers were long and nimble, and they mimed a thread between his hands, drawing apart. "the tether that holds you to life. You see, reversing death is an unnatural thing, and as a price for going against nature, there must be something to balance the scales. That tether — the pit takes it — a sacrifice. If you go to the pit while you still live, the effects are slight...at first. The pit chips away at the humanity of the living, but for the dead — the cost is higher, infinitely so."

Yamashiro's eyes were far away, his hands open and flat by his sides, the imaginary thread lost. "My wife came back to life with no memory of me. She remembered Akio, of course, but no matter how much he tried to tell her at first, how much he tried to explain that he did have a father — she did not remember. I suppose it was a blessing, and a curse. My wife loved me dearly — such that her love for me was her hold on life. But — in return for her revival, the pit destroyed any trace of me in her mind. And I have not contacted her since I settled her in a new life, but even then, the only memory I have of my wife, alive again, is her curious stare — directed at me — wondering why a stranger would care so much for her and her little boy."

His face spasmed in a brief memory of pain.

Felicity tentatively touched Yamashiro's arm. "I'm sorry."

Yamashiro turned his frank gaze on her. "I tell you this because I know you fear for Oliver's safety, you fear what the battle will do to him, that he'll give himself up to save the city. There is a way to bring the people you love back to life — and Oliver is a dear friend of mine. He saved my life, and Tatsu's, once before, and I shall be forever in his debt. So if you ask me to save his life, I will."

Felicity glanced at her computer, at the image of Oliver fighting his way through the hall to reach Ra's and his four guards. There was a gathering shadow in her train of thought, a growing instinct of why Yamashiro was telling her this. She leaned close to him, because she didn't want them — the others — to know. If it happened, if they were forced to use the pit.

Because she had a feeling — a narcissistic, misguided notion, maybe — but a suspicion nonetheless. That she knew what Oliver would be losing if he was resurrected using the pit.

"But if Oliver dies and you bring him back, he'll forget this — tether," she said, carefully.

There was something like pity in Yamashiro's gaze, condolences in his touch. "He won't be the only one making a sacrifice," he answered, steadily. "I can read people, remember? That's why I told you, Miss Smoak. Because I have a feeling that — if Oliver feels as strongly about you as you do about him — you will be the one making the sacrifice if he goes to the pit."
Yamashiro stepped inside the elevator, the very last one. His expression showed nothing but pity for her, like he understood — everything.

"I hope it doesn't come to that," he said, just before the doors closed, leaving a ringing silence in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

Yaaaas, well as you can see I've taken a buttload of creative liberty with the Lazarus Pits. Like it or leave it. Let's all pray that we'll survive 3x11 until 3x12 hits and we all die from the Olicity angst.
Something to Fight For

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, everyone still alive from 3x11?

Big fix for the post-Arrow weekend :)  
The reason why I was slow with previous updates because I was pretty much writing out this whole chunk (up until Chapter 83) and straightening everything out plot-wise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything was so precariously close to going wrong — so it was completely typical that there would be another crisis. And it happened as soon as they got back to command.

"Barry?" Caitlin's expression was braced for bad news. "What happened?"

"I've lost sight of two squads!" Barry yelled, the wind threatening to drown him out. "I think they're headed back underground, but I'm not sure — whoa —"

They all stared wide-eyed at each other when a motor horn blared over the speakers.

"—freight truck!" Barry sounded incredibly peppy for someone who'd just evaded a near-death experience. "Keep me posted — gotta run!"

"He loves that one," Cisco commented, and rolled his chair over to one of the computers, pulling up the maps while Felicity tried to scan city surveillance.

It was not a good sign, how easily Cisco was able to find out what was wrong.

"Uh, Felicity?" said Cisco, jabbing his finger at one of the monitors. "You said you detonated the charges, right?"

"I really don't like that question." Felicity glanced over her shoulder at his screen. It was an thermographic map of the tunnels leading to the bunker — and a largish mass was seemingly making its way towards the antechamber entrance. "Oh frack."

ETA fifteen minutes.

"But the bombs went off." Frowning in confusion, Felicity brought up the map on her tablet. "It's impossible — I —"

"It looks like one of them malfunctioned, and there's still a tunnel open."

Caitlin glanced at them worriedly. "Could it be the SCPD?"

Felicity shook her head. "I'm patched into police frequencies — and they don't even know that tunnel exists. It has to be the League."

"We should call Oliver," said Caitlin. "Or Barry."

Felicity glanced at the screens. She practically knew by heart where her friends were. They were
each fighting their way towards the four guards — and Ra's al Ghul. She couldn't stop them now, and every second she thought about calling Oliver and having someone else do what only she could do was another wasted second.

"Barry won't be able to do anything." Felicity was checking her supplies for tools. "If it's wiring, I can fix it and be out in a second."

"We'll come with you," Caitlin offered.

Felicity shook her head. There were calls still coming in from Lyla and the others. "You guys stay here and run communications, I'll take a few agents with me."

But even then she felt like she was missing something. Her eyes alighted on the cluster of black arrows on the table.

Cisco made a high-pitched noise when she snapped the syringe attachments from the arrow shafts, visibly dying inside from his tech being mutilated.

"Felicity," said Caitlin. "Stay out of trouble."

Felicity smiled, looking them both in the eye. "Hold down the fort," she said, and reached for her earpiece.

Barry tasted gravel, which was a relatively nostalgic feeling, given the fact that the last time he'd been beaten up — it'd been freshman year of high school.

Refreshing that ten years later and in the wake of becoming a superhero — he was still landing in the dirt.

"Great," he muttered. Barry shook himself out of the daze and contorted to see what tripped him. He'd been racing across the city to try and run some more distractions when without warning — thwack - splat - ouch.

Barry yanked at the cord around his ankle. Reinforced tensile steel cable — and it wouldn't budge. A dog barked somewhere in the distance, steam hissed from the grates, and protesters yelled, a few roads away. He was in the Glades, which was a rough area to say the least — but he'd been expecting muggers and broken glass — not dangerously professional tripwires.

When the darkness around him shifted, he realized what he'd (pun intended) run into.

"Oh," he said, as the assassins materialized out of the dark, along with some very scary-looking weapons. Three of them.

At a time that was totally inappropriate to the situation, Barry suddenly thought back to the number of times Cisco had experimented with Barry's healing.

None of those experiments had involved fatal wounds.

When the swords flashed downward, Barry twisted and hoped that they would miss.

Instead, he heard gunshots — three — and a sudden weight pressing on his caught leg.

He cracked one eye. Oh God. There was a dead body on his leg.

"Hey," said a gruff voice, "weren't you supposed to have a beard?"
Barry let his head collapse against the concrete at the familiar sight of Officer (or was it Captain?) Lance.

Barry tried to squeeze the Arrow's voice out of himself, he really did. He tried to channel Oliver Queen's growl (based on the many times he'd gotten on Oliver's less shiny side), but he just went for the vocal chord vibration instead, hoping the Captain wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

"Well," he said, wondering how he could get Captain Lance to turn his back so he could dash off, "I should get going. City needs saving. City's — been — failed." And stuff. Barry could practically feel Oliver's glare at the back of his head.

"You're not really him, are you?" said Captain Lance, kicking the severed wire out of the way as he turned back to face Barry, hands on his hips.

"Uh." Barry had never been very good at lying.

"I was watching you back there — you can barely handle that fancy Robin Hood prop of yours — and last I checked, the Arrow was fast, but not superhuman-fast. You're that guy from Central City, aren't you? The Streak or something. Did the Arrow tell you to fill in for him? Is that what happened?" Captain Lance's features twisted into a flicker of pain. "He didn't…leave? Did he run?"

Barry shook his head, vehemently, like he couldn't even pretend that Oliver had given up. Because it was unthinkable.

"He's here," Barry insisted, before realizing that he gave up on the ruse way too easily. "He's just — fighting. Underground."

Lame, very lame answer.

The Captain's eyes glinted. "Is that right?" He looked behind him, in the direction of the wailing sirens at the city center. There was a fire raging somewhere, riots elsewhere — places that Barry needed to be. "So he's fighting these — psychos — right? The League of Assassins?"

Barry realized that the Captain knew a lot more than he was letting on. "They took my girl — my youngest daughter," he said, staring at the sky. "My oldest — she's out there fighting, right now. Whoever you are — if you're helping him — you know how much this city needs him."

Barry stood his ground. "I promise. The Arrow's fighting for Starling."

Captain Lance nodded, and held out his hand. Barry had his experience with cops, and he knew what rude was, what cynical looked like, seen cops who genuinely didn't care about anything except punching in and out. The Captain was — different. Blunt and to the point, but his eyes were kind. Like Joe's.

"Good man," said the Captain. "Now get out of here. We've got work to do."

Barry grinned, and broke into a run. He was right. There was still a city to save — something to fight for.

Oliver twisted narrowly to avoid the lethally sharp spearhead, firing an arrow aimed for the throat. But the assassin deflected it with a twirl of the spear, sending the pieces skittering across the ground.

Around him, his friends were struggling with the best assassins the League had to offer, and they
were holding their own. They had to. Diggle had run out of bullets, and was deflecting steel claws off a tomahawk. Every blow sent a flurry of sparks flying through the air. Roy was a red blur, dodging around the razor whip-strikes, utilizing every counter-strike and defensive maneuver Oliver had ever taught him.

All of them — fighting. Still fighting. Oliver rolled to avoid a jab, picking up a fallen spear from the ground and swinging it at the assassin's feet. It was the arena again, and he was surrounded by hostiles, all carrying weapons they'd trained from birth to fight with.

Oliver wouldn't — and he couldn't lose.

The butt of the spear crashed into his midriff, and Oliver tasted blood. He rolled, coming up empty-handed and dazed except for the bow on his back and a desperate idea.

Blue arrow.

Bronze spear.

Oliver slammed the arrowhead into the ground until it cracked open — into the magnesium-white blaze of a welding torch. The assassin swung his spear again, and Oliver forced the spear shaft down with his knee, slicing downward with the arrow in his hand.

The spearhead clattered useless on the ground, and Oliver shot back — embedding the blaze inside the assassin's stomach. Acetylene didn't burn out even in conditions of oxygen deprivation, and the reflection of a white blaze glinted in the black iron mask, even as the assassin fell and landed with a hollow thud.

Cisco was crazy, but his insanity had just saved Oliver's life.

On the dais, Nyssa struck the sword from her father's hands and advanced with murderous purpose. She'd beaten Ra's al Ghul, and it was all going to end. Oliver had been so sure of it — until he wasn't.

Something was wrong. It was all too easy. At his feet, the oni mask on the dead assassin bared its fangs in a still-defiant smile, and it hit Oliver — how theatrical the whole thing had been. Too staged.

Nyssa forced Ra's to his knees, his head bowed.

"Nyssa!" Oliver shouted, but she wrenched her father's head back, baring his throat.

Oliver suddenly realized why Ra's found out about Nyssa's betrayal. She was an unmatched fighter and a born general, ruthless in her heart and steely in conviction — but she was a blazing fire where Ra's was smoke and shadow.

Nyssa was always — and had always been — too angry, too fixated on what she wanted. Revenge, her father dead at her feet…to see that Ra's al Ghul was playing them again.

The hood slipped off and away — and Oliver saw her sword falter.

Because it wasn't Ra's.

The impostor bared his teeth in a dazed smile.

"Love has clouded your judgment, Nyssa al Ghul," he said, in an eerie monotone, as if the words weren't his — but his master's.
Nyssa yelled in fury and her sword arced behind her head like a whip.

"Nyssa — no!"

Oliver raised his bow — but he was too late. Nyssa impaled the impostor and tossed him to the side in disgust. Oliver went on his knees in the spreading pool of blood, shaking the assassin.

"Where is he?" he growled. "Where?"

The sounds of battle raged around them, but Oliver heard only the softest rasp of dying breath — a meaningless whisper.

He let go of the shoulder — now still — and stared at the ripples in the spreading pool of blood. A waste. All a goddamn waste.

"Snake," Nyssa hissed. "He escaped."

With a cry of rage, she swung her sword and struck the head from one of her father's lackeys — leaving a trail of red in her blade's wake.

Oliver shut his eyes — just for a second — one second of despair — and opened them again. Then he raised his hand to his ear. "Felicity?"

Felicity glanced at the ARGUS agents behind her and raised a finger to her lips. They had to be quiet. Very quiet. She clamped the flashlight between her teeth and reached for the bomb. The pixelated smiley face was flickering like a broken TV screen, the kind of damage not fixable by bonking it a few times (she didn't really want to risk it, what with the fact that it contained enough explosives to collapse a concrete tunnel).

She unscrewed the back and pored over the circuitry, keeping one eye on the tablet's thermography map and the approaching League reinforcements. Everything good — lots of time. Happy thoughts. The flashlight shook a little while she worked, like the unseen skittering and chatters in the dark were the footstep of an assassin creeping up on her with a sword.

But yippee, because the agents had assault rifles.

Cisco. Felicity wanted so very badly to sit him down and give him a firm lecture (probably a rant) about how explosive devices were not the place to exhibit abstract design — i.e. abysmally confusing color-coding of the wires. Jeez — it was like Cisco had decided to make the inside of his bombs resemble a crayola box.

Felicity nearly swallowed the flashlight when she got the green smiley face up again. Four wasted minutes, but whatever. She slapped the bomb back onto the grimy wall and backed away like it was a dangerous wild animal. The agents filed back into the antechamber, but Felicity stayed near the entrance. She wanted to make sure it would go off this time.

Her earpiece started buzzing. Felicity paused to pick up the call, her hand hovering over the detonate button.

"Hello?"

The signal was pretty bad, considering how far out of range she was, and she had to ask him to repeat it.
"Oliver?" She tapped the earpiece. "What did you say?"

"Ra's," he said, in a single word of despair.

"What happened?"

"It was an impostor." Oliver's voice rasped with frustration. "It wasn't him. He played us."

Behind her, one of the agents was shuffling his feet with impatience — like he couldn't wait to be gone. But Felicity kept her back turned, knowing that her expression would betray the depths of the oh-frack she was currently feeling. She pressed her hand against her forehead, her mind racing to outthink — outsmart — the piece of human scum who redefined slimy. Impostors had to be somewhere in the Super-Assassin's Guide to Being an Elusive Douche.

"We don't know if he's escaped — he could just be in hiding. Okay, okay — we can do a lockdown — search each zone, I'll detonate the charge right now and head back up to command."

Instantly, she knew she'd said the wrong thing. "Are you alone? Please tell me you did not go out alone." Oliver's voice was harsh with panic.

Still that shuffling noise. Felicity shut her eyes briefly, staring at the tunnel wall. "Part of me wants to take offense at that," she said. "And no — I took a few agents with me. Cisco and Caitlin are up in command."

"I'll meet you."

"Oliver, you'll just be going up to command with me —"

"Even so. Where are you?"

Felicity sighed. "Sending you the coordinates." She balanced her tablet on her elbow and sent him the location, all the while hearing the annoying shuffle behind her. Finally, she spun around in exasperation. "Just one min —"

She trailed off, because instead of three ARGUS agents — there were two corpses, lying facedown in their own blood, and a third in a headlock by a hooded assassin.

Felicity slipped the earpiece into her fist, feeling the tiny vibrations against her palm — Oliver trying to find out why she'd stopped responding. The shuffling noise she'd heard was the agent's feet scrabbling for purchase on the floor, because he couldn't breathe. His face was turning blue, and Felicity was powerless to help him.

"Please," she said, as the room echoed with the terrible sound of someone dying.

With a single — powerful — twist of his arms, he broke the agent's neck with an agonizing crunch of bone. Felicity didn't make a sound, even though her heart was slamming against her ribs.

Ra's pulled the hood from his face with a faint sigh, as if it was a relief to be free of the confining disguise.

She met his eyes with a faint shudder. So that was what looking into the eyes of pure evil felt like. Huh.

"You and I have matters to discuss, little one," said Ra's.
3x11 - Thoughts

(1) I legit squealed during the first five minutes when Oliver said he'd stay and they kissed for like half a second before the sword through his chest ruined it.

(2) Not sure how I feel about Laurel now, she kept bouncing back between annoying and crazy and sympathetic depending on who she was talking to. Why didn't she use the sonic device against Brick?! Why does the Canary Cry always disappear?!

(3) Penicillin tea. Lol. I thought I read somewhere that penicillin is broken down by the acid in the stomach, so Oliver drinking it was either a placebo or legit useless.

(4) Oliver giving relationship advice. Double lol. Pot (Maseo), meet kettle (Oliver). Do not give up on the Arrow and become a marriage counselor. Please.

(5) Yelled a lot of stuff at the computer when Felicity was cleaning up Ray's face scratch and they were having their little 'moment'. Ah, CW, your inexplicable tendency towards love triangles has reared its ugly head. You already have The Vampire Diaries (which I've given up on because of the love triangle-square-octagon). Just no. Please no.

Then again - jealous Oliver. Hm.

Fingers crossed for 3x12.
Felicity felt her tablet vibrate, sending shivers up her arms. The assassins were getting close, and she couldn't delay setting off the charge any longer.

"There's no way out," she said. "They will find you."

Ra's stepped smoothly over the body, his arms behind his back in a patronizingly relaxed stance.

"Yes," he agreed, almost kindly. "My daughter Nyssa wants to kill me, no? She has attempted it once before, and she will fail again. No — I will be done long before my daughter tears herself away from her battle-rage."

Felicity didn't like the word *done*, because it implied that Ra's wasn't interested in the idea of escaping — that he was willing to make this a suicide mission and take all of them with him. She felt the adrenaline flooding her limbs, reminding her of the fight or flight instincts — she just hadn't decided. There was a knife in her jacket pocket, syringes in the other — and the sonic device. With razor-sharp clarity, she knew what she wanted to do. What she'd try to do — for her friends' sakes.

When Felicity met Ra's al Ghul's soulless black eyes, she realized that she was out of lies to tell, and out of time.

"Have it your way," she said, and slammed her hand into the controls. The tunnel behind her flashed crimson from the detonated charge, and she ducked as the heat wave roared over her head, rubble crashing near the buried entrance.

The brazier was smoldering on its side, leaving most of the room in shapeless darkness. A few seconds — a few seconds to save Oliver's life. Fumbling for the earpiece in one hand, the knife Nyssa had given her in the other, she backed away until she could feel the wall at her back. "Oliver —" she said, and heard the faint sound of his voice on the other end. "—Don't come," she said, and smashed it into the ground.

Then she raised the sonic device in front of her and drowned out the silence in a scream.

Oliver knew. The second the comms failed — he knew. Even though the comms failing temporarily wasn't an uncommon response to an explosion going off. Detonations sent interference into communications — and Felicity was safe with the agents. No one else knew she had left.

Rationality was telling him that Ra's had to be in the battle, that he hadn't made a mistake by leaving Nyssa behind — because she was the only one who could lead the army. That Roy and Diggle would hold down the fort until he could get Felicity, and they'd track down Ra's together.

But his gut told him that Ra's — like Slade — had made things very personal, and there was a reason why the war was just a backdrop, a prelude to what needed to happen.

Him against Ra's al Ghul.

Oliver reached into his quiver and loaded one of Cisco's arrows. Fear toxin — opaquely black as the darkness inside the pit. This time it would be him shooting the poison into Ra's' veins.

He would end this.
Oliver looked up suddenly, from the rasp of static on the other end of the open line.

"Oliver —" Felicity gasped, and he heard the muffled thud of impact.

Oliver felt the first harsh stirrings of panic, and how close his composure was to disintegrating. "Felicity?"

She gasped again, and said, "— don't come."

The line shrieked with static, and Oliver had to tear the earpiece away. But around him, the walls were shaking, from the unmistakable sound of the Canary Cry.

_Felicity._

The scream tore at Felicity's ears, threatened to immobilize her with instinctive fear. But she remembered how Sara used the scream as a weapon, turning what was a sign of weakness into a weapon of strength — utterly, unapologetically fearless.

Felicity had to be fearless now.

Even though better judgment told her that the run-in with Cheshire should have been enough for a lifetime, it was too late _not_ to hit the gas. Felicity had just reached for the syringes in her pocket when the disembodied sword swung out of nowhere. She ducked, and it crashed into the wall above her head, showering her with sparks. Still on the ground, she pushed herself away from the wall, coming up behind Ra's al Ghul.

Which in hindsight, wasn't the best idea. He was a massive shadow — as if he'd somehow gotten taller in the darkness — and Felicity had to make a split-second-not-so-educated guess as to where his neck was. The needle screeched off his armor, and Felicity heard the rush of movement that told her a blow was coming.

Then his hand closed around her throat.

Felicity choked for breath when he lifted her off the ground, as if she weighed nothing — nothing at all — and slammed her back-first into the wall. Her head cracked against the concrete, and the syringe went flying from her hand into the dark.

Blood surged into her head and she struggled for breath as Ra's pried the sonic device from her fist and studied it with mild interest. Her vision was already fading by the time he smashed it beneath the heel of his boot, but Felicity still heard the screams in her ears when she blacked out for real.

Oliver smelled blood. It grated razor sharp on his senses, on his composure, but he kept to the shadows like he'd been taught, an arrow in his bow. His hands were steady — and he wanted to do it. He wanted to kill Ra's al Ghul.

"Oliver Queen," said Ra's, his voice echoing in the hollow chamber. "You've kept me waiting."

Oliver stepped forward, his eyes adapting rapidly to the darkness. The first thing he saw was Felicity, crumpled beside an overturned brazier. Her chest barely — just barely — rose and fell, and there was a crust of blood on her temple, cuts on her hands.

Oliver would have gone to her, but he kept the arrowhead pointed at his old mentor's throat. He stood behind Felicity, the point of his sword resting by her throat, watching Oliver with an
unmistakable sense of…

Pride. As if it pleased him to see Oliver as the Arrow — because it was close, so precariously close to his appearance as the Hood.

"Ra's," Oliver growled. "It's over."

"No." Ra's' voice was inscrutable. "My daughter has not won her war. And — it seems — I have the source of all my troubles lying at my feet."

The tip of his sword scraped lightly against the ground, a hairsbreadth away from the thrumming pulse in her neck. As if Oliver wasn't standing there, ready to kill him, Ra's crouched beside Felicity, gazing down at her with a thoughtful expression.

"I remember her," he said, stroking the hair from her face — a tender gesture with nothing but coldness behind it. "Standing beside Nyssa, in my city. My daughter should have hidden her better — but I suppose she missed having a little golden bird on her shoulder. Quite like Ta-er al-Sahfer, isn't she?"

Oliver almost flinched from the veiled knife thrust. Ra's was toying with him, reminding him that he could do to Oliver what he'd done to Nyssa.

"Sara gave her soul to the Devil," Oliver said, his words sharp. "Felicity never will."

Oliver tensed when Ra's tilted Felicity's chin this way and that, as if he was appraising a child's toy. "Because she carries the sunlight with her, I suppose. No wonder my daughter could not hide her presence, no more than she could screen the sun from view. And Oliver Queen — well — I see why you could not tear yourself away from this — Felicity."

Oliver said nothing, feeling the corrosive sense of loathing rise in his belly, sharp and bitter in his mouth.

"Darkness," Ra's murmured, "always tries to seek out the light. You crave this girl so, because she makes you believe that you have a soul where there is nothing but a void."

"That's not — true." Oliver's hands were steady. "I have my humanity. I always did."

"You speak of your humanity. You speak of it as if it makes you strong. So tell me," he asked, softly, "if I kill her — do I leave your soul in darkness? Will you find your way back to your true self — your true calling as the Hood?"

Felicity stirred with a faint moan, and Ra's sank his fingers into her hair, hauling her upright.

The sword gleamed against the pale skin of her throat. "Love," said Ra's, "makes weaklings and fools. Like my daughter — it is time you learned that lesson."

"Ra's — it's over. I've come this far as the Arrow — and as Oliver Queen. The Hood is the past, and there is nothing you can do to throw me back into that darkness again — nothing you can do to make me sacrifice my humanity."

"You have come this far?" Ra's repeated, slowly. "You have come this far because I have allowed it. I could have killed you where you stood, but time, and time again — it seems as though you must be reminded of this lesson."

Felicity had barely stirred when Oliver released the arrow. It hurtled towards Ra's al Ghul's throat,
but his sword swung upwards in a flash and cleaved it in two.

"No more clemency," Ra's hissed. "No more mercy."

Felicity was pretty sure she'd torn more than a few staples in her back. She was also pretty sure that she wouldn't be able to make a sound, not after the way Ra's had given her the ragdoll treatment by holding onto her throat.

But she wasn't planning on screaming any time soon.

Oliver was fighting Ra's al Ghul — and Felicity didn't know if he could win. He'd been fighting a war, he was bruised, wounded and exhausted. Ra's moved like he had all the time in the world, parrying Oliver's blows with leisurely ease, as if they couldn't faze him. Whenever he shot at Ra's, his sword came up in a deadly arc that sliced the arrows to pieces.

Sparks scorched the ground beneath their feet, from the repeated clash of steel against steel — and blood. Ra's opened up a slash on Oliver's chest and kicked him across the room, but when Oliver stabbed an arrow into Ra's' leg, he only tore it out with painless ease.

Felicity had no doubt that Oliver could beat Ra's — that eventually, somehow, he would turn things in his favor. But in her heart of hearts she doubted his ability to judge when that fight would turn against self-preservation. She doubted his ability to stop before it killed him.

And she couldn't let that happen.

The syringes were in her pocket, her last weapon. She just needed the right moment to use it — the right distraction. She gripped the wall, digging her fingernails into the grooves to pull herself upright.

Oliver blocked a swing from Ra's that twisted his arm painfully behind his back. The sword clattered onto the ground, but Ra's slammed his fist into Oliver's throat, leaving him gasping for air. With one smooth motion, he kicked Oliver squarely in the chest and sent him flying towards the mound of jagged debris at the other side of the room. Oliver landed with an awful crunch, his bow skittering from his grip as he clutched at his throat like he couldn't breathe.

Ra's sighed — as if Oliver's performance had deeply disappointed him — and bent to retrieve his sword.

"No!"

Felicity scrambled to get in between them, her arms raised high.

Oliver was trying to push her aside, rasping as he tried to regain his breath. Felicity wouldn't let him. She stayed on her feet, her eyes fixed on Ra's.

"Please," she croaked, even though she knew he wouldn't listen. But with a shiver, she remembered how Ra's had stabbed Nyssa, back at the docks. The way he pulled her close, as if he liked to watch the light fade in death.

All she wanted was for him to move closer, whether that meant a sword going through her body, or not.

Felicity was about to break a promise, a pretty big one.

Ra's' mouth twisted in a smile. "Do you wish to die for him, little one?"
Before she could react, Ra's' hand cracked across her face and he backhanded her out of the way. Felicity raised herself on her elbows, digging into the grit as she blinked to clear the explosion of lights from her vision. A shadow fell across her face, and she realized — suddenly — that Oliver was standing in front of her.

The hand on his neck was the only thing holding him up as he swayed, unsteady on his feet. Blood dripped from his sleeve — an old wound, reopened. Ra's centered his sword in the middle of Oliver's back, tilting his head to the side as if he was only mildly curious.

"Pick up your bow," he ordered. "And make your choice."
Oliver felt the sword point digging into his back, but all he could see was Felicity. Her eyes were dark against her face as she slowly sat up. The side of her face was flushed crimson from the blow, but her eyes seemed to crackle with silent fury.

No, Felicity wasn't beaten. Not by a long shot.

He saw her hand reach into her pocket, and was reminded of a very different time, a very different threat.

She'd been on her knees, like she was waiting to die, until she stabbed Slade with the cure.

Their eyes met with a flicker of mutual understanding. In response to his silent look, she nodded, an infinitesimal movement of her chin.

"It seems," said Ra's, "that the source of all my troubles with you stem from this one girl. Consider this a small kindness. I will allow you to kill her yourself — or I will do it on your behalf. And tenderness is not in my nature."

"You want me to murder my own humanity," Oliver said, softly.

"Before I kill you for your crimes against the League," Ra's agreed.

Felicity's eyes followed Oliver as he picked up his bow, reached for an arrow in his quiver. But Oliver knew that she'd only have the smallest fraction of a second to move, to act. She'd waste time trying to get the syringe from her pocket. She needed to have the weapon in her hand.

Oliver knew which arrow to use. He slipped it from the quiver and fit it to the string, his body concealing the arrowhead from view. Felicity's eyes widened slightly when she saw the arrow, and she met his gaze in a wordless confirmation of what she'd understood.

The promises they'd made hung between them, but there was really only one.

*Whatever happens tomorrow, Felicity, I swear that I will try my hardest to come back to you.*

And he meant it. Oh God — he'd meant it.

There was real surprise in her eyes when Oliver lifted his hand to her face, covering the angry red flush with his palm. As if it was goodbye.

Felicity turned her head and pressed a kiss into his hand like she was absolving him of the guilt. No words.

*I love you,* he thought.

Oliver's hand was still on her face when he let go. His bow — and the single arrow — clattered to the ground, coming to rest just beside her knee.

"No," said Oliver, and it was to Ra's. "I won't do it."
"A pity," Ra's answered, and Oliver watched as Felicity's hand closed stealthily around the syringe, sliding it from the bow.

There was a part of him that believed — still — that Ra's al Ghul thought of him as a protégé, a piece of work unfinished, that Ra's would not kill him until he'd burned away Oliver Queen to ashes and left behind the Hood.

But that small hope vanished when Oliver felt the slight pressure of Ra's al Ghul's hand tightening at the side of his neck. It was the subtle tensing of the muscles, meant to hold him still — so that Ra's could run him through with his sword.

Oliver opened his eyes — opened them wide. His humanity made him strong — it made him fearless. And he was. Felicity was his humanity — and he'd given her the weapon to take down Ra's al Ghul. For the first time since he'd said goodbye to her on the train, since he'd taken his last breath of the air above — he felt like he could finally breathe.

That he could do — anything.

So he turned and fought back.

Felicity's fingers had just closed around the arrowhead when Oliver moved — too fast to see, too unexpected to anticipate. All of a sudden, his fingers had closed around Ra's al Ghul's throat and he was grappling with Ra's — twisting his sword arm down and out of the way.

It all happened with an eerie, fluid grace, and Felicity believed — for the smallest instance — that everything was going to go their way.

Until it didn't.

Ra's gripped Oliver's injured shoulder with his free hand, twisting his fingers into the flesh until Oliver cried out in pain, his grip momentarily slackening on the sword.

It was a moment too long.

"Oliver!" she screamed, as the blade flashed upward.

Too late. A handspan of the sword erupted suddenly from Oliver's chest, the blade dark and glistening with his blood. His hand slid from Ra's' throat, limp and open — as if in surprise. Oliver staggered, as if his legs couldn't bear his weight any longer.

"You have fought valiantly, my son." Ra's touched Oliver's forehead, as if in a blessing. "May you be spared from the fires of torment."

A dribble of blood stained Oliver's lips as he drew a ragged breath.

"Felicity," he said, his voice harsh with pain. "Now."

Molten heat rushed into Felicity's limbs as something inside her fractured, as the part of her that was inextricably linked to Oliver Queen ruptured and bled with him. It was the part of her that saw everything shrink into painful clarity. Oliver came down hard on one knee, dragging Ra's' sword down with him and leaving a space open for her to strike. Felicity pushed off of Oliver's shoulder, her other hand raised high over her head. Ra's was still smiling when she stabbed the arrow into his neck, hard enough to puncture his vein…and release the strengthened fear toxin into his bloodstream.
To suffocate him with the same dark pit he'd used to torture Oliver.

Ra's hand closed around her wrist, painfully tight, but she could see that he was already fading. His face was a mask of scorn, but his eyes seared into hers with pure, wordless hate.

She didn't care.

"Burn in hell," said Felicity, just as she heard Oliver draw his bow again.

Three arrows in rapid succession, piercing Ra's al Ghul's armor before he even hit the ground. Felicity staggered, wrenching her arm out of Ra's death-grip. She drew a harsh breath, hardly daring to believe that there was a body lying at her feet.

That the war — it was over.

"Felicity," said Oliver, and the bow clattered out of his grip.

"No — no — Oliver!" She rushed to his side and caught him as he fell. But he was too heavy, and all she could do was ease him onto his back. The front of his armor was warm and sodden with blood — his blood. Felicity felt the erratic heartbeat in his chest when she tried to put pressure on the wound — her hands came away red.

The color had drained from Oliver's skin, and his eyes were wandering, struggling to stay open. The war was over, but there was still one — one — last fight.

"Stay with me," she said, as her vision blurred with tears. "Oliver — OLIVER!"

Oliver had fought enough battles to know that he was dying — that he wasn't fighting an unwinnable battle, but one he'd already lost. Jagged flashes of pain radiated from his heart, as every slowing pulse beat carried the blood out of his body — until it all came to a stop. His head was pillowed in Felicity's lap as she fought to keep him with her, even though every second carried him further and further away.

And he wanted to keep her close — until the very end.

If he was going to die wearing the mask of the Arrow, he was going to die in the arms of the one person he trusted the most in the world — the one person who'd guided him through the darkness and into the light — the one person who'd always seen him as he was, both Oliver Queen and the Arrow, and saw the life he could live as both.

The life he could have lived.

With Felicity, he would die as himself, and it would be his last act of selfishness. He wanted to pass from this world remembering how lucky and how privileged he had been — to have found Felicity Smoak in a world of odds.

"Stop," he said, softly, trying to find her hands. "Felicity — stop."

He caught her hand in his, linking their fingers together. Small-boned, fitting easily into his — resting on his heart.

"I'm sorry," he said, because he could feel it coming — the onslaught of drowsiness that meant his body was shutting down. Already he was finding it hard to focus as the light blurred the edges of her face, softened the harsh shadows of the battlefield. "I promised."
Felicity's breath was hot against his lips as she kissed him, breathing against his mouth like she could breathe the life back into his body, her hands shaking with desperation as she stroked his face.

Oliver couldn't taste the blood in his mouth anymore — only her — just her. His hand reached up to cup her face, to keep her close.

"I love you," he murmured, against her lips.

"You honor the dead by fighting," she whispered, pressing her forehead to his. "And you are not — done — fighting, Oliver. You have to know that."

Oliver had to smile. "I would have fought for you — every day of my life," he said. "But I wish — that I'd fought for you sooner. I didn't realize — what it was — what I felt —"

Felicity shook her head, and he felt the wetness of her tears on his face — maybe even his own. "I know, Oliver," she said, thickly.

But she didn't know. Flickering through his mind was everything he wished he'd had time to tell her — how he walked into her office on that one bright day, expecting nothing and finding...a world of possibilities. How much he owed her — and would never stop owing her — for the smiles she drew out in him, for every argument they'd had that convinced him to see sense, for every kiss that felt like it'd be worth a lifetime.

And it was.

The pain was already starting to fade, and Oliver knew it was coming. He forced his eyes open, tracing her features with his gaze, meeting her blue eyes — always so bright and understanding and beautiful — for the last time. He would remember this. Sunlight in her hair — laughter on her lips — and love in her eyes.

He let out his breath in a low, shuddering sigh.

"Felicity," he said, and it was a word imbued with fearlessness, hope, and love, everything that was and should have been.

The last thing Oliver felt — after his vision faded into an edgeless black — wasn't Felicity's tears, but the rush of her breath as she bent and kissed him. Their lips touched — and Oliver felt himself slip away.

Felicity held him. She held Oliver Queen in her arms long after he'd exhausted his last, labored breath. Long after the blood on her clothes — his blood — started to cool. Long after she was meant to let go. She didn't remember prying the earpiece from Oliver's collar, or calling Diggle — telling him — she didn't remember what.

Yamashiro would save Oliver's life — so she wasn't meant to be crying. Because she was crazy enough to believe that a friend from Oliver's past could bring him back to life with a pit. Because she was crazy enough to fight the team if they tried to stop her from bringing Oliver back — and why would they?

Felicity hadn't told them what only she and Yamashiro knew. That bringing Oliver back would mean she loved him enough to bear it when he looked at her like a stranger, those three — four — years erased from his mind. Impossible — unexplainable — but inevitable.

And she did. She loved Oliver enough to lose him, as long as he was alive.
But Felicity's heart broke, all over again, when Diggle — when Roy — when Oliver's friends, his family, saw him lying dead in her arms. He'd died as the Arrow, like he'd been afraid to.

Diggle sank to his knees when he saw the body, his fists clenched in the dirt. She realized that she'd never seen Diggle cry — until he did, for Oliver. Roy shook his head in silence, backing into the wall and sliding slowly to the ground. He covered his eyes and shook without a sound.

Nyssa alone walked past them, her sword trailing unawares across the ground as she strode up to her father's dead body. Her shoulders were rigidly straight and she was deathly silent, but when she turned around, Felicity saw the stunned look in her eyes, the twin tear tracks making their way down her cheeks.

"I am sorry for your loss, Sa'ida," she breathed, balancing her father's bloodied sword on her open palms, the one Felicity couldn't look at. "The League customarily leaves behind the instrument of death to honor the dead. Oliver will be honored — as a loyal friend, true to the end. I only regret that he had to fulfill the oath with his life."

"Your fault," Roy snarled, slamming his fist into the wall with a sound that made Felicity flinch. "He only went after Ra's because of you!"

Nyssa only turned her head to the side, gazing down at Oliver's corpse with a very human expression of regret. "I am sorry," she whispered, and Felicity felt the wordless sensation tear at her heart again.

Nyssa was reliving what it'd been like to lose Sara.

Felicity stirred. She was being unbelievably — unbearably — selfish. She laid Oliver down, walking swiftly to Roy until she could put her arms around him. They didn't know what she did. They could mourn Oliver — but they didn't have to, and it was unforgivably selfish of her to let anyone grieve for him when they would see him again.

"There's a way," she said, holding Roy close. "We can bring Oliver back."

Diggle wiped his face, rising slowly to his feet. He was trying to hold it together — trying to show her that she was in denial. "Felicity," he said, reaching for her hand. "He's gone."

Felicity shook her head, and took Diggle's broad hands in hers, holding them tight. "There's a way," she promised. "We can bring him back."

Whatever it took.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyyyy there (sheepishly). You should hate me after this chapter. You probably already do. But trust me, as much misery as there is, there is going to be some sweetness too. Plus, you saw this coming from a mile away.

3x12! Hang in there guys.
Oliver woke in the sunlight. He gave a little start — because he was on his feet, and in front of him loomed a plane. The Queen family plane.

What was he doing here?

"Pass me that wrench, would you?"

As Oliver watched, a hand stretched out from behind the plane, waiting patiently for the tools. Oliver moved as if in a dream, picking out the wrench from one of dozens and placing it in the open palm. One hand braced against the aircraft, he stepped around it, tentatively — hardly daring to believe.

But there he was.

"Dad?" said Oliver, with poorly concealed shock. "What are you —"

"— making sure you and your sister don't miss that weekend at the vineyard," said Robert, grunting as he finished what he was doing. "There."

Oliver slowly sank into a crouch, because he couldn't understand it. He remembered this — the afternoons spent fixing planes. But not anymore. The plane had been sold — and his father was dead.

"But you're…" he began. "Dad — how are you here?"

Robert frowned at him while he wiped his hands on a rag, looking more thoughtful than annoyed. That was the way he'd always looked to Oliver — gruff, but not unkind.

"Everything all right, son?" he asked.

Ghosts — Oliver knew — were there to tell him something.

"I'm just trying to figure out what you want to tell me," Oliver said, steadily, watching his father. "I don't know what you want to say."

Just then, a shaft of sunlight filtered in through the open door, and Robert lifted his hand to shield his eyes. Oliver watched the dust motes spin lazily in the patches of light, tracing the elusive movement of the air.

"You never hated me," said Oliver, softly. "Even when you should have. You always saw some good in me — something worth forgiving."

"I wasn't exactly perfect myself, was I?" Robert said, lowering his hand as the sun faded. "I know I've caused you so much pain — with my mistakes. And I should have been there myself to see them through."

"No," Oliver was shaking his head, reaching for his father. "None of us were perfect, but you showed me a way to make it right."

"I," said Robert, holding up a screwdriver, "showed you how to fix a plane."
Oliver smiled, taking it from his father's outstretched hand. "You did."

They worked in silence for a while, side by side, and Oliver was amazed at how easily things came back to him. It'd been years since he'd last touched a plane, since he'd last fixed one with his own two hands.

"Some things you don't forget," Robert said, as if he could sense what Oliver was thinking.

Oliver turned his head briefly to smile at his father, before he went back to work.

"I know who you've become," Robert said, suddenly. "I know who you are."

The tool made a hollow clink when Oliver let it slide from his open hand.

"Dad —"

Robert held up his hands. His voice shook with emotion as he continued, "I know you survived those five years in hell — and I couldn't be happier that you did. But I know who you are now — what you've done to save Starling City and right my wrongs — and I could not be more proud of you."

"How?" Oliver asked, still not understanding. "How did you —?"

In response, Robert got to his feet, pulling Oliver up with him as well. His hands were heavy and solid on Oliver's shoulders as he held him at arms length, looking at his son. Robert smiled.

"I'm always with you, Oliver," he said. "No matter where you go — I'm never really gone. I love you, son."

It was Oliver who moved, then. He put his arms around his father and hugged him, because — deep down — he was still a boy who'd lost his father and regretted it, every day of his life.

"Survive," Oliver murmured.


Then the dream — a beautiful, beautiful dream — changed.

"My beautiful boy," said Moira, putting her arms around Oliver like he was still small enough to be cradled, even though he'd grown broader and taller since then. But no matter how old he got, Oliver had never shied away from his mother's embraces, never forgot how his mother always pressed her cheek to his, as she did now.

Oliver squeezed his eyes shut, inhaling the scent of home. "Hi mom," he said, as if he'd been gone for a long, long time.

"As long as you come home," she said, slipping her arm into the crook of his elbow.

Oliver looked at her in surprise. When Moira smiled at him, the natural coolness in her patrician features melted away to the maternal warmth he remembered. She was his mother again, the one who used to sit by his bedside when he was a boy, while he confessed the worst things he'd done that week. Always, always forgiven.

"I always know what you're thinking, remember?" she said, stroking the side of his face. "My beautiful boy."
Oliver smiled, and pulled her close again. "Never alone."

"Never alone," she agreed.

Oliver knew where he was — what he was seeing. The dreams were of his past, his mother and father — both gone from him, the people he fought to honor. But there was a restless, shifting quality to them, flitting from one scene to another like slides on a projector.

One minute, he was running down the hallway of the Queen mansion, dark wood panels and dusty portraits blurring into streaks of colors and shadows as he rounded the hallway, chasing the sound of his sister's laughter.

"Speedy!" he called, and he was swinging his younger sister up into his arms — a laughing child with glossy dark curls.

The next minute, he was standing at the foot of the stairs and his sister — older now — was running towards him.

"Ollie!"

She threw her arms around his neck, catching him in a hug.

"Where have you been?" she said, eagerly. "I missed you."

"I'm back now," he promised. "I'm not going anywhere."

Again the dream was restless, his mind was wandering between past and present, as if he was searching…searching for something.

The smell of the sea, cold wind ruffling his clothes, blowing long brown hair into both their faces. Oliver pulled back from a kiss to find Laurel smiling at him, pushing her hair behind her ears and holding out her hand — the Queen's Gambit moored in the quay in front of them.

But as soon as Oliver's hand touched hers, the dream shifted again, and he was wearing the mask of the Arrow, feeling the night air race past him while he swerved on a motorcycle.

"Up ahead," said the husky voice in his ear.

Pale blonde hair, a black mask hiding her eyes, her torso pressing warm against his back — Sara. The two of them fighting against the world.

Wrong.

Again, everything melted away.

Diggle pushed a basket of fries towards him. They'd been laughing about something, the both of them chuckling from a bad joke. The windows at the Big Belly Burger near the Foundry were steamed up, the rain outside hissing when it hit the steam grate.

The air smelled like grease and they both had new scrapes and bruises from being out in the field, but Oliver had never felt more peaceful in his life, sitting in their usual booth at Big Belly Burger.

"Thank you, John," he said.
Diggle hiccoughed, and reached for his drink. "Don't thank me yet, Oliver. I'm still not done saving your ass."

The lights of the city stretched out as far as they could see, and somewhere, a police siren wailed over the gusts of night wind. They were crouched on a rooftop, waiting for their mark. Oliver heard the tiny shuffling of Roy adjusting and readjusting his grip on his bow — because he still got nervous, even though he was getting better.

Oliver leaned forward, because it was almost time.

"Don't abandon me," Roy said, in a rush.

Oliver looked at him and shook his head. "Never," he answered, meaning it.

The dreams were slowing down, as if the restless force that was driving him through the past and the present had found what it was looking for — the elusive thread in a sea of countless others.

Oliver stirred again, this time because a shaft of sunlight had fallen directly across his eyes. He turned his head on the pillow, and his gaze lingered on the person beside him in bed, a bare shoulder curved from beneath the sheet, a tangle of gold spread on the pillow beneath her head. There was a faded scar on her left shoulder, a puckered circle left by a bullet wound, an old scar he traced with his fingertip.

The hum of restlessness faded the more he looked at her. Felicity's eyes stayed closed even though the sky outside the window blazed pure blue, asleep under the stream of sunlight that pooled around them both.

Oliver kissed her across the pillow, kissed her under the sunlight — and felt her respond. Felicity reached for him across the bed, nuzzled at his neck, resting her cheek against his pulse like it was habit.

"You're back," she murmured sleepily, as if he'd gone away.

Oliver pressed a kiss into her hair, her forehead. "You asked me to," he answered, simply.

Felicity's eyes were still closed, but the corners of her mouth lifted at his words. Oliver gathered her closer still, holding her hand over his beating heart until — soothed at last — he closed his eyes and drifted.

It was the last dream — he could tell. There was something clear and dizzyingly focused about the scene, as if he was supposed to remember everything about it — as if it was too precious to forget.

Oliver could feel the nerves rise in his throat, the tightness of his suit collar, the shifting agitation in his feet like he was tired of standing still, like he was waiting for something — for someone.

Flowers. He could smell flowers. The single white rose in his suit. And wood, creaking floorboards beneath his feet — and the rows of people sitting behind him.

He was standing alone — well — mostly alone.

Oliver glanced to the side and met Diggle's amused stare, intercepted his sly wink. Seeing Roy fidget with a suit he was obviously uncomfortable in made Oliver feel a little better, but not much.
He wasn't good at standing up in front of crowds.

On the other side of the aisle in a deep red bridesmaids' dress, Thea widened her eyes silently at him, telegraphing a wordless threat to stand still. She twitched the bouquet of red-and-white roses in her hand, as if she was telling him to face the front — like they were kids in church again, wearing their best clothes and trying not to make trouble.

Oliver heard the rush of people collectively rising to their feet, and turned towards the end of the hall. The doorway was blurred by the shafts of sunlight, interspersing to form an archway of blazing white.

It was through the archway that he first saw her.

Felicity.

The sun gilded her face, softening her nervous smile, and lingered on the stray curls tumbling from her swept-up hair. She was looking down at her feet, as if she was worried about tripping over her dress, a fall of pure white lace that swirled as she moved.

Oliver caught Donna Smoak's eye and smiled, even though his smile couldn't quite match the proud beam of a single mother walking her daughter down the aisle. He saw Donna's mouth move, whispering something to her daughter, and Felicity looked up.

Their eyes met across the distance, and Oliver smiled, because he knew — knew — that the dream wouldn't be changing after this. Not this time. There was nowhere else he wanted to be, no one else he wanted to see. It felt like he'd gone through a lifetime of dreams — flickering through the past, and even the present — all to get to this moment.

This.

His present had always been too intertwined with his past, with what had already gone, with memories and ghosts and regrets. But this — this — was a beautiful dream. This was a future.

"Nervous?" Felicity whispered, as she took her place beside him, side by side at the end of the aisle.

Oliver took her hand, their fingers intertwining. "Line forms behind me," he murmured.

Then, quietly, peacefully — everything ground to a gentle halt, like the silence between breaths, the blank space before a new sentence.

Chapter End Notes

Could not resist the wedding bit. So sorry. Had to do it. Was very fun to write. Swear to God that when I was (ahem) researching wedding dresses that I could see Felicity looking great in every damn one of them. Urgh, choices. Help me decide.

Also - FELICITY’S WEARING A RED DRESS TO THE DYLA WEDDING. BUT DA FUQ WHY IS RAY PALMER THERE TOO? Oliver had better dance with her or I'm calling love triangle bullshit.
I apologize, it's been a long day.
Aftershock

Chapter Notes

Yeesh. This fic really is getting long. And sorry if my writing made you think the story ended on 84 (bwahahahaha — nope.)
Getting there though.
Anyway, I just want to thank everyone for sticking with the story, for reviewing (both on FF and AO3 or Tumblr), for bothering to check and say something about it. It's been a LONG LONG story and I know that I kill you sometimes with my questionable plot choices, but I regret nothing :D

Felicity's laptop was starting to give her Toasted Thigh Syndrome. Which was partially her fault, for staying too long in the same position. The sky outside was burnt amber and dusky purple, Starling City at night. She heard the rush of cars passing beneath the slightly-opened window, smelled the rain *plink-plunk-ing* on the glass.

It was way past a decent hour, way past her time to be home — back to her neglected apartment and empty bed.

But she didn't want to leave Oliver.

It was actively strange, seeing him in a hospital, in an actual hospital bed, instead of a makeshift recovery bed/table in the Foundry. Diggle and Roy had wanted to put him back in the Foundry, and getting him into Starling General took some very creative spinning on Felicity's part, with some help from Maseo.

His heart monitor beeped steadily in the background, an anxiety meter that kept her stress levels at a minimum as long as it showed that he still had a pulse. Lazarus pits weren't exactly clinically-tried-and-tested methods for resurrection, and she still kept expecting a caveat — a catch.

Oh wait, she knew that already.

She just hadn't told anyone yet.

Felicity got up, brushing her skirt flat as she walked up to Oliver, hesitating to pick up his hand — even though it was loose and open by his side. As bruised and cut as the rest of his body, but familiar. Calluses in places she remembered, the dry heat of his wide palm against her own, fitting together like nesting dolls.

Part of her didn't want him to wake up. It was the selfish part of her, the one that couldn't face the idea of having Oliver look at her like she was a stranger.

But the other part of her knew that having Oliver back with them — alive — was worth anything. Seeing how the team reacted to Oliver's death was enough to reinforce what she already knew. It was unbearably conceited for her to hold him hostage, even if she could tell herself it was out of love.

Sure, love was trying not to die so that the significant other didn't have their heartstrings sawed out,
one at a time.

But love was also letting someone go.

Ironic how her advice to Barry was coming full circle. She'd told him to trust Iris, trust that she'd find her way back, and live his own life in the meantime. Now it was her turn, even though it was a pretty big if that mystical life-force-restoring holes in the earth would treat memory loss as a temporary thing.

Felicity bent to kiss Oliver's forehead. For once, he wasn't frowning. There was something innocent about Oliver when he slept — as if the darkness, and the fears had all fallen away, leaving him in peace. He deserved it. He deserved to sleep as if there was nothing to worry about, nothing to fear.

Her touch lingered, unwilling to pull away. But it was time.

"What?" said Roy, looking at Felicity like he was worried she was having a stroke.

Felicity glanced at Maseo, who kept his arms stoically and unapproachably folded, standing on the opposite side of Oliver's hospital bed.

"I said — there's a chance that Oliver might not remember something when he wakes up." Felicity pretended to flick some dust from the hospital coverlet. "Nothing big, really. He just may not remember a blonde IT girl who used to work at Queen Consolidated and now partially runs it. Specifically — he might not remember that I know who he is, i.e. his nocturnal habits that involve pointy objects and vigilantism."

It sounded a lot less stupid in her head.

Diggle looked up from his hands. "Are you serious right now?"

"We brought Oliver back using a mystical body of geothermal water," Felicity said, trying (and failing) not to retreat behind her snark. "We should all be getting psych evaluations."

"Why you?" Roy asked. "Why not Thea? Or the fact that he's the Arrow?"

How did Felicity know she was Oliver's quote-tether-unquote? She didn't. But she had a feeling that fate was just that big of a pain in the ass.

"I don't know," Felicity answered, honestly. "And I'm not sure. This is just me warning you that the Oliver who wakes up might not be the same Oliver you remember. I'm sorry — I should have let you all in on it, so that you could have made the choice with me. But the fact is — he's worth it — to me. Whatever happens to him."

There was a long silence, punctuated only by the steady activity of the heart monitor. Roy was still looking at his shoes when Diggle rose, wordlessly, and engulfed Felicity in a hug she definitely hadn't been expecting.

"What's this for?" she asked, in surprise.

"You know why," he answered, pulling back. He held her firmly by the shoulders. "So what are you gonna do — if he really doesn't remember?"

Felicity tried to shrug, but she couldn't quite pull it off — the stoic necessity vibe. "If he doesn't remember letting me in on his little secret, chances are he's not going to want me in the Foundry. So
I'll bow out. It's the only way this works — the only way everything goes back to normal."

"I wouldn't call it normal," Roy commented. His stare was frank, and very steady. "None of us really survive without you on the other end of that line, hacking into federal databases and invading the privacy of unsuspecting terrorists."

This was the closest Roy would ever get to saying that he'd miss her, and Felicity kissed him on the cheek for it.

"Call me — whenever," she said, firmly. "If you ever need a hand. Night or day, no matter how grumpy I sound on the phone, I swear I'll be happy to hear from you."

Diggle put his arm around Felicity's shoulders. "I've said it before, and I'll keep saying it until you listen, but you're irreplaceable, Felicity. I honestly have no earthly idea what we're gonna do without you."

Felicity nudged Diggle with the side of her head, trying to be light even though her heart was breaking. "You won't be. Not really."

Oliver woke in a patch of sunlight. It blinded him at first, blurred his vision so all he saw was an indistinct shape at the corner of his eye, a small hand slipping out of his.

"Oliver?"

The voice was unfamiliar — a woman's — tense with apprehension. But Oliver couldn't see anything but the flicker of remembered dreams and muddled realities. The heart monitor shrilled when he lurched forward, gasping like he could still feel the water in his lungs — taste the hot sulfur on his tongue. He clutched at his chest, remembering the terrible pain in his heart — the way his flesh seemed to sear around the blade that'd impaled him — lying in half-darkness on that cold floor as he bled out.

Dying.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

He was supposed to be dead.

"Oliver!" The same insistent hands were on his face, holding him steady. "Hey — hey —you're all right! You need to calm — oh —"

Oliver jerked to a stop, and found himself inches from an unfamiliar face.

"—down," she finished, and swallowed, as if she was very, very, nervous.

Oliver realized — belatedly — that her hands were still on his face, and shifted out of her grasp, endeavoring to control his expression. All his senses were in overdrive, especially because there was a stranger in the room and no explanation for why Diggle and the others would have put him in a hospital. From the opposite end of the bed, he gathered his composure, made his calculations. She was dressed for the office — heels, black and white dress with an interestingly vivid print — glasses, blonde hair curling loose around her shoulders.

The look in her eyes unnerved him the most, because she stared at him with a kind of bright intensity that seemed — to him at least — very fragile, as if it was ice stretched too thin.
Even though she'd called him by name, Oliver had never seen her before in his life, and of course it showed. But what he didn't understand was the flicker of raw emotion that crossed her face when he'd pulled away from her touch.

"I'm sorry," she said, quickly, backing away. "I — Queen Consolidated — I mean — Palmer Technologies — Ray—Mr. Palmer mentioned you were in the hospital. He keeps Google Alerts on everyone, and…"

Her hands twisted together as she spoke, perpetually in some kind of jittery motion.

"Aaand I just wanted — to — make sure that you had your…penicillin. Yup — that stuff's really important. For fighting…STDs," she finished, and winced.

Oliver leaned back against the headboard, bemused. He'd apparently come back from the brink of death, and he was talking to a complete stranger who'd just used the words penicillin and STDs in the same sentence.

"Who did you say you were?" he asked, carefully. He knew Palmer — not very fondly — and he was curious as to why a former competitor would show interest in a washed-up ex-billionaire. Especially since she didn't look like his secretary.

"I'm the VP of Palmer Technologies," she said, in a rush, "which means that I'm basically partners with the guy who stole your family's company…so I'm going to stop — talking — right now."

Oliver — in spite of everything — had to smile at her nervous babble. "I meant your name."

There — again.

So he hadn't imagined it. The same raw hurt — gone before it could linger, swept behind a closed door. She blinked rapidly at him, like someone stunned from an unexpected blow. The unfiltered speech marked her as someone disarmingly amusing, but the expression on her face was intensely — privately — vulnerable.

"Felicity Smoak," she said, already reaching for her coat and bag, slung across a table like she'd been there for a while.

"I'm sorry." He leaned forward, curious at that brief flash of hurt. "But do I know you?"

She — this Felicity — shook her head, tucking a loose fall of hair behind her ear. "No," she answered, shakily. "No, you don't. I'll just —"

Before he could say anything else, she'd left the room, nearly slamming against the door in her inexplicable hurry, leaving him to wonder.

Felicity didn't realize she was crying until she was, and she didn't want to be. Diggle and the others had gone to Big Belly to pick up some food, and she single-mindedly forced herself to keep moving, to meet up with them, give them the warning.

She hit someone with her shoulder and apologized, made it two feet before she hit someone else. The elevator doors were just opening when she reached them, and she rushed inside, slamming her back against the wall and trying to breathe.

In, out. Normalize the very abnormal fact that she'd just lost someone she cared about — even though he was technically back from the dead.
Felicity Smoak?

Hi, I'm Oliver Queen.

I'm sorry, but do I know you?

No, you don't.

Felicity silently raised her hands to her eyes, shutting out the stark fluorescent light as she tried to separate the memories from the reality of the present. Distinguish the Oliver who smiled like it was just for her and the Oliver who smiled because it was his only response to her profound and unfamiliar weirdness.

Even though Maseo had warned her, a part of her hadn't believed him — hadn't wanted to believe him — until she saw it for herself. Nothing. Nothing in Oliver's reaction to suggest that they'd met before she'd instinctively tried to calm him from some nightmare.

Now she knew for sure that she'd been Oliver's tether — which meant that at some point, his love for her had been linked to his life. His life.

Felicity shook her head, wondering if all her advice was going to have some kind of ironic bite to it. Barry — letting go, and now she had to. Oliver — holding onto a life outside the Arrow.

And he had.

Every time he'd chosen the Arrow and hit pause on whatever they'd been — it'd been a step away from a normal life and one closer to submerging himself in the darkness. It'd been him stubbornly, wrongly, thinking that being the Arrow meant no Oliver Queen.

But in the end, he'd held onto her.

That was something, right?

The love he'd felt for her was strong enough to bring him back from the dead, strong enough to be his hold on life. Not many people could say they'd experienced that kind of love.

Something, it had to be something.

The doors opened to the bustle and chatter of the ground floor, and Felicity lowered her hands, started to move.

Head down, keep walking. She made it about two feet out of the lift before she ran into Diggle and the others.

"Felicity?"

Felicity lifted her head, her eyes wide with shock. The first face she saw was Yamashiro's, and it showed only a resigned sadness — because he'd warned her. Roy took one look at her face and swore, loudly. Diggle took her hands and tried to guide her to one of the seats, but something in Felicity shattered when she looked at her friends.

She just — just —
"I can't —" she said, and felt herself crumple. She couldn't pretend — not now — that everything was okay, because it wasn't. It wasn't — in the most painful way possible. She sank into a wounded crouch at Diggle's feet, in the middle of the crowded hospital. Doubled over, head on her knees even though it was too late to shield herself from the shrapnel, the fallout. Her wrists shook in Diggle's grasp, because it hurt.

It hurts so goddamn much.

"He doesn't remember me," she whispered, her forehead pressing into her knees, as if she could force the thought out of her mind. "Oliver doesn't remember me."
Letting Go

Chapter Notes

Maybe it's just me, but I listened to Vienna by Billy Joel while I was writing these two chapters and even though I'm usually a stone cold killer it made me feel stuff. (Btw, Trollenheim said that's the Billy Joel song that he associates with Olicity, so make of that what you will)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We won a war — this isn't fair," Roy snarled, to nobody except himself. "We didn't lose anyone — we shouldn't have to."

Around them, the noises of Big Belly Burger made everything seem a lot less bad than it was — drowned out in shame-free grease and salt. They were in their usual booth, just the three of them.

Felicity lifted her head from her hands. She was already feeling ashamed about her breakdown, like a child throwing a tantrum. "I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have lost it like that, I —"

"Felicity," said Diggle, gently. "When Oliver thought he lost you, his split his hand open trying to punch a train wall. You just lost the love of your life — you don't have to apologize."

Felicity's insides hurt at the mention of Oliver, but it was getting better. She could sit up straight now, with only the ragged feeling in her chest as a reminder of what she'd lost.

"So what are you gonna do?" Roy asked. "I don't think either of us could judge, if you decided to pull out — completely. Since Oliver doesn't remember why there are actual functioning computers down in the Foundry, or how he's been using tracking algorithms and facial recognition to find criminals — there's going to be a lot of lying."

"Can you lie to Oliver?" Felicity asked, frankly. "For this?"

"Neither of us is particularly happy about the arrangement, and frankly I'm not sure how much we'll be able to bluff."

"But you always win at poker," Felicity said.

"Oliver's sister broke up with me because she found out I was lying," Roy added, "but sure, let's keep up the facade that either of us know what we're doing in front of the computer."

"Call me at work — assuming I still have a job after I get back." Felicity rubbed her eyes. God. Work. Palmer Technologies and not having to dodge deadly arrows while hacking on the run. That was actually starting to sound a little appealing. "The point is — we'll figure it out. There's no harm in saying you know who I am — Oliver just thinks I'm that psycho lady he saw in his hospital room."

Roy lowered his head onto his hands.

"There's still hope," said Diggle, reaching for Felicity's hand. "It might just be temporary."
Felicity looked down at their hands. His was warm and solid and should have made her feel better — Diggle's advice always did — but this time, she wasn't quite sure. Instead, she reached for Roy's and added it to the pile, holding both their hands in hers, all without a sound.

"You sure about this?" said Diggle. He kept an arm around Felicity as they walked back up to the hospital room, as though he was worried she'd break down again. "We can come up with a story — sit him down and explain everything."

Felicity shook her head, because she'd already thought it through — too many times. Without the circumstances that led Oliver to trust her in the first place, there was no way he'd believe them, not now. If she'd been working as an IT girl in Queen Consolidated and his family still owned it, seeking her help might have made more sense. But his family's company didn't exist anymore, and their paths in regular life were just too different to ever cross.

"You know why we can't," she said, softly.

They'd all stopped at the corner, within sight of the door — Oliver's room. Felicity smoothed down the shoulders of Roy's jacket, straightened his collar, smiling because he let her. Then she gave him a hug, a goodbye hug because everything was going to change.

When it was Diggle's turn, Felicity adjusted the scarf around his neck, pressing it flat. "John," she said, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Take care of Oliver," she said, to them both. Between them, Diggle was Oliver's reason, his brother, and Roy was the closest thing Oliver would ever have to a son, a reminder that there was a legacy to pass on as the Arrow, an example to set, a partner in battle.

"Make sure he gets out of the Foundry — during the day, I mean — stop him from taking idiotic risks, and tell him when he's being stupid," Felicity said, tripping over her words as she tried to condense all her worries for Oliver into one neat package for the handoff, instead of a jumbled collection of memories that made her flustered and incoherent (her usual self).

Diggle hugged her again, silently. Felicity's hands clenched into fists against the back of his jacket, her eyes squeezed shut.

"I left a surprise for Oliver in the Foundry," she said, softly. "It's a cat — long story. I think he'll like it."

Diggle smiled down at her. "You always knew him best."

Felicity smiled back — at them both. "Go," she said, backing away. "Go see him."

Oliver sat on the edge of his bed, contemplating the possibility of discharging himself from the hospital. The sky outside the window was a rare, cloudless blue. A new day, a day without the shadow of Ra's al Ghul looming over his family and friends, and Oliver hadn't expected to see it. He hadn't expected to live.

And a part of him was still wondering why he had.

It was slowly coming back to him, a gentle trickle. His father – his mother – their faces, the things they'd whispered to him when he'd been asleep, suspended in some kind of limbo between life and death. Not just them – the past – he'd seen Speedy, both as a child and as she was now – Diggle –
Roy – his friends, reminders of his crusade, reminders that he wasn’t alone. That he’d never been alone.

The sunlight warmed the floor beneath his feet, and it reminded him of that one day he’d had in Starling City — his first day home in months, when they’d all been waiting for the axe to fall. He’d stood in the sun and decided that he was going to come back and live both lives — as the Arrow and Oliver Queen.

A frown crossed his face, because there was something… off about the memory. Something odd, like a word placed out of context, or an unexpected gap in the narrative. The desire to live — to not be consumed by the Arrow and the mask — to start again with his family’s legacy or maybe something of his own — they were all strong, irrepressible drives.

But he didn’t know why.

There was a knock on the door, and Oliver turned towards it.

"So you didn't die again," said Diggle, stepping into the room.

"I should have," Oliver said, softly. "And I did. What happened, John?"

"We didn't want to take any risks," said Maseo, having appeared soundlessly in the doorway. "The Lazarus pit may have had some effect on your internal workings. Your friends wanted to ensure your safety."

Lazarus pit. Maseo's wife, Tatsu. Oliver touched the place where the blade had torn his heart, a faded white scar that should have meant the end of him — but didn’t. All because of his friend.

"Maseo," said Oliver, because he didn't know what else to say. "Thank you."

A brief smile flickered across Maseo's serious face. "I owe you a debt, remember?"

Oliver remembered. "I wouldn't have claimed it," he said, quietly.

"I know, Oliver." Maseo touched his shoulder. "Which is why someone else did. Someone very dear to you — I imagine."

The cryptic remark made Oliver frown. "What —"

Roy appeared in the doorway, his eyes wide in warning. "Look who's here," he said, and Thea strode past him, right up to Oliver's bed.

Every hair on his sister’s sleek head seemed to stand on end with anger, but before Oliver could react, Thea had him in a tight embrace, her breath of relief hot against the back of his neck.

"You insane — moron!" she said, loudly. "A year of backpacking — then you get into a spelunking accident — and I find out from Roy that you're in the hospital? You complete ass of an older brother. Was a call too much to ask for?"

She folded her arms, glaring down at him.

"Spelunking?" Oliver repeated, narrowing his eyes at Diggle, who shrugged behind Thea's back.

"I was his instructor," said Maseo, inclining his head. "I apologize for any worry your brother might have caused you — but I was assured that his reflexes were better than they turned out to be."
He'd forgotten how good Maseo could be at lying.

Roy snorted, but quickly stifled it in response to Oliver's sharp look.

"I'm sorry…Speedy," Oliver said, firmly. "I won't be — spelunking — any time soon."

"You know what?" said Thea, throwing her arms up into the air from exasperation. "I'm going down to the gift shop right now and buying you the biggest and most insane stuffed gorilla — and I'm gonna make you carry it all the way home. So the next time you even think about skipping town on me again, you'll think about George the plushy gorilla."

The door slammed behind her.

"That went pretty well," Roy commented. "I think she believed you."

"What the hell, John?" Oliver said, swinging his legs down from the bed, only to be pushed back onto it by his friend. "Spelunking?"

"Now hold on just a sec." Diggle leaned forward, as if he wanted to get a good look at Oliver. "Are you all right?"

Oliver narrowed his eyes. "Evidently."

"So nothing feels…off," Roy said, slowly, as if he was speaking to someone hard of hearing. "Nothing at all."

Oliver shook his head. "No," he said, vehemently.

They both glanced at each other, like they knew something he didn't.

Felicity looked down the hospital corridor, towards the open doorway where Oliver and the others were. Diggle — Roy — she trusted them to keep up the poker faces, because there was no way that they'd be able to convince Oliver that he'd told his secret to a girl who'd just word-vomited STDs and penicillin.

Urgh — even with stranger Oliver she was still embarrassing herself.

"Sa'ida."

Felicity jumped at the sound of Nyssa's voice — materialized purely out of nowhere. Today she was Nyssa Raatko, sans League Armor in a dark blue dress and black trench coat, but looking no less dangerous.

"Running errands?" Felicity asked, finding it hard to imagine her doing anything…normal.

Nyssa folded her arms, shooting a dark smile in her direction. "Of a sort. I came to say goodbye. I must return to Nanda Parbat — there is much to do."

Felicity had been expecting that. In fact, she'd thought Nyssa had already left. "Might be a good time to get away from ARGUS, maybe do some remodeling," she said, lightly.

Nyssa turned her head towards the end of the hallway, at the pane of glass blazing with sunlight. "I've decided that my city is no longer to exist underground. When we rebuild, we rebuild under the open skies. Nanda Parbat will no longer be a tomb, but a city under the sun."
Felicity thought she was kidding, until she realized that Nyssa's sense of humor rarely stretched that far. "Really? I thought rule number one of assassins was doom and gloom."

Nyssa inhaled, deeply.

"It is what Sara would have wanted," she breathed. "We may fight in the shadows, but that should not mean that we exist in the darkness — I see that now."

*It was just like a good friend once told me — I had to find another way.*

Felicity blinked away the tears suddenly blurring her vision. Not again.

"Sara would have been very happy," she said, softly, letting her head tilt back against the wall. "But I think she would have stayed with you — through everything."

Nyssa's gaze softened, and she moved closer, trailing a hand across Felicity's cheek. "Thank you for your service, Felicity."

Felicity smiled, and she was still smiling, long after Nyssa had melted away — League-trained to the last — and it was just her in the corridor, alone again. Her eyes lingered on the open doorway, her attention drawn to the faint voices she knew. There was a lot she would have given, to be able to walk through that door and have everything be okay, to crush Oliver in a hug and feel his kisses in her hair — to see him smile in the way that felt like it was just for her, one more time.

One more minute.

But — always a but — she would have given up more, so much more, just to see Oliver breathe again. And she had. She'd held him in her arms as he died and now he was alive, and that would have to be enough. Better to have burned bright than not at all, and they'd had their moment to burn — with a blinding, all-consuming light.

She couldn't keep staring at the dying embers for her whole life.

Silently, she turned her head towards the end of the hallway, towards the blinding day outside, a new morning. The sunlight threw everything else into shadow, her choices shrunk to the one she knew in her heart of hearts to be right.

"I'm letting you go," she said, only to herself.

One step forward, then another. Each one harder than the last, but it was time. Past time. No more tears. "I'm letting you go, now," she repeated, walking towards the sunlight.

**Chapter End Notes**

Unstructured thoughts:

- Yeesh, I just glanced through the deleted scenes doc and that thing is 527 pages long (oops).

- Yeah I dug up the cat promise from chapter 20-ish.

- There might be a time jump in the next few chapters.
- Wonder how Felicity is gonna appear in the 3x14 flashbacks (rubs hands together evilly).

- I do not like the love triangle thing, but I think Ray may have to make an appearance in the next few chapters.

- Burned through Galavant in one day and I cannot take Vinnie Jones as Brick seriously now. That man is too funny. I just can't. DAMMIT.
Three Months Later

Oliver dodged Diggle's swing and whacked his shins with the bamboo rod, making him land hard on one knee.

"One of these days," Diggle panted, "I'll learn a new trick that's gonna blow you away."

Oliver grinned and offered him a helping hand. "Another round?"

"Hah — no."

Somewhere behind them, the computer sounded an alert. "Hey," said Roy, "we got a — gargh!"

Diggle and Oliver both looked around when Roy tripped. Swearing, he shot back up from behind the table, holding a dusty orange cat under one arm.

"Stupid cat," he muttered, depositing it on one of the worktables. "Last week it was dead rats on the doorstep, now it's rolling around on the floor like it owns the place."

Diggle cleared his throat while Oliver walked over to the computers, pulling on his shirt. "You got a match?" he asked, as the cat butted its head affectionately against his forearm, purring like an engine.

"Yeah," Roy was still glaring at the cat, a long-standing feud Oliver had learned not to pick sides in. "Facial recognition tracked them all the way back to the smelting plant. It's probably their home base. Officer — Captain Lance thinks the Vertigo's being made in the Glades for easy distribution."

"We still have some of the cure left over from last time," said Diggle. "Provided they haven't changed their recipe."

Oliver moved closer to the monitors, searching the matches for familiar faces. "Worst-case scenario, one of us contributes a blood sample for analysis," he said, and he was only half-joking.

"Before or after they pump us full of nine-millimeter rounds?" Diggle said, sarcastically.

But Oliver was already reaching for his bow. "Talk me in," he said, starting to move.

"Hey, Felix," said Diggle, as the cat's tail swished across the keyboard. "You worried about Vertigo too?"

Roy rolled his eyes, unzipping the front of his suit. There was a fresh cut on his arm, which was making him crabbier than usual. "Just send the sample already."

Diggle chuckled, not bothering to hide his amusement at Roy's inexplicable dislike for Felix. Maybe
he was jealous that Oliver liked the cat, even though it'd been something of an anonymous gift — to him, at least. Both Roy and Diggle knew where it'd come from, because Felicity warned them about the surprise, some kind of promise she'd made in Nanda Parbat about a pet for Oliver. They'd returned to the Foundry after the hospital and found the cat waiting for them in Felicity's usual chair, tail swishing from side to side.

Diggle had taken credit for the cat, but Oliver was the one who'd decided to name it Felix — and the significance was, again, apparent to everyone except Oliver himself.

"Need any help with that?" Diggle asked, as Roy pulled out the supplies for a suturing.

"Not after you've touched that fleabag," Roy muttered. "I need to practice my sutures anyway."

Oliver was on the other side of the Foundry, staring at the monitors as the evening news played, absent-mindedly stroking the cat's dusty gold fur with one hand. There was work from his day job in front of him — plans he was making with Walter Steele for Queen Incorporated — plans that should have been taking up most, if not all, of his leftover energy. And Diggle had seen him work, with a kind of steely concentration — the kind that meant Oliver was determined not to be the absentee CEO he'd been two years ago.

This time, he was going at it for real.

Except Oliver wasn't wearing that expression — the one he had when he was thinking about work — but the one Diggle had started to see more as of late. Thoughtful, guilty, and brooding were in his usual repertoire, but he'd never seen Oliver look as lost as he did now — in those private moments when he thought no one was watching.

"Just how long are we going to keep outsourcing help?" Roy asked, pulling the needle through his skin with surprising calm. "I can't keep pretending that I know what I'm doing when I use her computers."

"You know how to use facial recognition," said Diggle, washing his hands in preparation for a medical intervention.

"Yeah, but that's like 0.8% of what's really on that hard drive. I swear that some of the programming isn't even in English." Roy's hand jerked, and he winced.

Diggle took the needle and forceps from Roy before he tore his own skin from agitation. "I know that we can't keep the pretense up forever. I don't think Oliver's gonna believe either of us if we say we hacked into a federal database."

"But…?" Roy said, sarcastically.

Diggle knew the why of it — but none of them really knew how. A thousand times he'd gone over the possibilities, the different scenarios in which he could nudge Oliver towards seeking a specific source of outside help, a certain graduated-from-MIT genius who was supposed to be fighting crime along with them.

But it all came down to the fact that things had changed. Felicity wasn't an IT girl at Queen Consolidated anymore, not someone that Oliver could travel down eighteen floors to see about a banged-up computer hard drive. It made sense when QC was QC, and not Palmer Technologies, when Felicity wasn't the Vice-President of a billion-dollar company and Oliver wasn't in the process of rebuilding his family's legacy while doubling as a vigilante.

And the choice had always been Oliver's. The decision to trust a stranger with his identity — that
had always been his secret to tell, not Diggle's, or Roy's. No matter how they tried, they couldn't
replicate the same coincidences and necessities that led to Oliver trusting Felicity Smoak with his
secret.

Which brought them to the present. Missing a piece. But Diggle hoped. If Oliver himself was starting
to wonder, to feel restless — maybe things wouldn't stay the same. Maybe things would change.

Felicity lifted the hair sticking to the back of her neck. It was unbelievably hot, and the 96% humidity
wasn't helping — at all.

"This is a bad idea," said Maseo.

"If you're talking about the outdoor seating, I'm totally with you," she answered, without glancing up
from her computer. She was responding to an email explosion from Ray, because he was having a
work lunch that was apparently boring him to butter-knife-suicide (she told him to try the steak
knives instead).

They were sitting in an outdoor café, braving the late afternoon sun near a Singapore street market,
which had very nice cold (and colorful) drinks to offset the murderous heat.

Maseo seemed unbothered by the heat (to be fair, he'd probably been in hotter places), and adjusted
his sunglasses. Felicity was sticking to her regular glasses (shades had a tendency to make her bump
into things), and adamantly trying not to wilt in the heat. Or think about the fully air-conditioned
hotel room she could be sleeping off the jet lag in.

"I told you before that Tatsu won't remember me," he insisted. "This is a needless exercise in
futility."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Felicity said, innocently. "I'm just visiting a Palmer
Technologies subsidiary, and you're a good friend I happened to drag along with me." That part was
technically true. Ray was the one who'd wanted to meet with some Singapore investors, and she'd
roped Maseo along for the ride.

She nudged the rainbow-colored dessert towards him. "Shaved ice?"

Maseo might have been glaring at her through his sunglasses, but she couldn't tell.

"Besides," Felicity added. "An exercise in futility is trying to help Roy and John pretend that they
have the expertise to hack an FBI database."

Maseo sighed, loudly. Classic sign that he was about to say something sagely, stoic, or sarcastic. His
three main moods. "Why don't you just send Oliver a CV and be done with it? At the rate you're
going, you might as well apply to join the team anyway."

"Ha-ha." Felicity finished the last command she'd been typing. "Oliver may have been selectively
memory-wiped, but I'm pretty sure he still remembers how to shoot intruders. I may be blonde, but
I'm not that blonde."

The ice cubes in Maseo's drink rattled when he took a sip. "I'm sure you already know this," he said,
"but you're only prolonging the inevitable. Sooner or later, your paths will diverge — if they haven't
already. Your business with the Arrow ended when Oliver woke in his second life and had no
memory of you. While your intentions may be noble, the kindest thing may be to step back, and let
everyone adapt to the changed circumstances."
Ouch. Maseo had always been frank to the point of bluntness, but ow. Felicity's typing stalled as she tried not to let her feelings show. But they did — because it was her.

Felicity turned her gaze towards the sun-washed street. "I'm not doing this to get Oliver back," she said, a well-rehearsed mantra plucked straight from her pointless ruminations. "I know I won't, because that was the price I accepted for my deal with the devil — no offense. But this is about Starling City. That was the whole reason I signed on with the Arrow in the first place, and until the city doesn't need saving — until my conscience tells me to stop — I can't. So I won't."

Maseo removed his sunglasses, and set them on the table with a soft click. "Felicity," he said, softly. "You'll only hurt yourself."

Felicity knew he spoke from experience, and it made her sad — sadder than she could say. But it was different for Maseo. The tangled relationship hadn't started over the salvation of a city, but Felicity and Oliver's had. It was the whole reason Oliver brought her into the team, and if she was being uncomfortably — pathetically — honest, maybe a part of her thought that if she kept helping her friends, there'd still be something connecting her to Oliver.

"Join ARGUS," said Maseo. He looked her dead in the eye, unflinching. "Then you won't just be helping cities like Starling — you'll be protecting countless lives, all over the world."

"Did Lyla —"

"Lyla would never have asked you," Maseo finished. "She needs to think strategically as Head of ARGUS, but that doesn't mean she's not insensitive to your situation. Simply put, she respects your feelings too much to ask."

Felicity sat back in her chair, a little stunned. Not at the offer to join ARGUS (Waller had famously tried), but at the fact that she was seriously considering it — her choices.

"You'll find that ARGUS changes depending on its leader, and Lyla Michaels is not Amanda Waller." The subtext hinted at the word thankfully. "ARGUS could use someone like you, if not every federal agency in America."

Felicity's computer buzzed.

"Hold that thought," she muttered, bringing up the facial recognition program. Bingo. Their cameras had a match, Tatsu Yamashiro.

"Ready?" she asked, with a smile.

"She's beautiful," said Felicity.

Maseo had gripped one of the rails, as if in support. There was no reluctance in his expression — nothing feigned or contrived — just wistfulness. There couldn't have been more than thirty feet between him and Tatsu, as he stood in the shadow of a market stall and watched his wife stroll through a crowded market.

"She is," he agreed.

Tatsu Yamashiro was built long and narrow, the smallest gesture of her slender hands drawing the eye like a ballet dancer's, her face as lovely as a painted doll's. She had a healthy bronze glow to her skin, product of the Singapore sun, and color in her cheeks. Tatsu's hair was loosely braided because of the heat, but it still fell into her eyes when she reached for a checkered pinwheel among the
rainbow jumble of toys in a children's stall.

Based on first impressions alone, Felicity saw that Tatsu took after Maseo in her facial expressions. Her features were serious by nature, but when she blew gently on the pinwheel and it spun in a flurry of kaleidoscope colors — she smiled.

Maseo's face was full of painful longing, and it made Felicity's insides twinge with sympathy. "Maseo…" she said, softly.

"We call them kazaguruma — miniature windmills. She must be buying one for Akio," he said, in a curiously flat voice. "He always liked the sound — like the rush of birds taking wing."

Felicity gave him a little nudge. "Help her choose one."

Maseo jerked his head sharply. "No — it's not my place. Not anymore."

But a tremor ran through his voice.

"You love her," said Felicity. "Why don't you try again?"

"The same reason you don't see Oliver anymore." Maseo had turned to her, and they looked each other in the eye.

Felicity knew. She only had to imagine the way Oliver slid out of her hands — back at the hospital — and she knew. Because it hurt to remember everything that should have been and wasn't, because there would never be two moments exactly the same — the circumstances and the instances — that had been their lives together.

Maybe because a darker, more resentful part of her wondered, that if what she and Oliver had was so goddamn strong, strong enough to hold him to life — how was it possible that he could come back and remember nothing?

"It's too much — and not enough," said Maseo, with a sad smile.

Felicity was glad that the sun suddenly came on strong, blazing into both their faces and making it impossible to see. She raised her hand to shield her eyes, squinting against the cracks that seeped through her fingers. Her hand was still raised when she heard the soft gasp.

"Maseo."

Beside her, Maseo was still as a stone. Blinking hard, Felicity turned her gaze back to the market, and she didn't dare to breathe.

In the receding sunlight, they saw her. Tatsu was standing in the middle of the street, staring at Maseo like he was a ghost resurrected. For a moment, the only sound from either of them was the pinwheel rotating gently in her hand. Then — suddenly — it whirled with the sound of open wings, spinning into a blaze of colors — because Tatsu was moving, crossing the thirty feet between them at a run —

"Maseo!"

Maseo stumbled, catching her more out of instinct that actual understanding. Tatsu's hands were on his face, pulling him close, whispering in frantic Japanese — but Felicity didn't need to understand what she was saying to know.
Know that she — for some, unknown reason — remembered.

And that maybe, there was hope for Oliver still.

Chapter End Notes

Yo. I realize most of you may despise me at this point, but just to clarify, before you see the words FIN or Epilogue in the Chapter name, I AM NOT ENDING THE STORY YET CALM DOWN (phew - deep breaths, please).

I am an Olicity shipper, if that's not already and immediately obvious. Because I would not have started an eighty-something-chapter fic if I was not *for* Olicity hardcore. I want them to have a happy ending too, especially since I sense that 3x12 is going to hurt like a b***h.

Some reviewers were asking what 'letting go' means and I'm guessing that based on Felicity's advice to Barry, she's going to have to step back and trust that (maybe, possibly) Oliver is going to remember her. Or not.
The wooden dock beneath her heels rattled as children raced by, families on holiday, families enjoying the view of the bay below — a panoramic view of the undulating bay, streaked with all the burnt orange and dusty red shades of a dying day. But Felicity was alone by the railing, staring down at her phone with the sun seeping around her, as she stood frozen — still in shock.

Felicity weighed the phone in her hand, more preoccupied with keeping her fingers from trembling than actually trying to find Diggle's number in her contacts list.

Tatsu remembered Maseo — remembered what she was meant to have lost (permanently) by coming back alive.

It'd taken her two months — two months for a lifetime to come trickling back — but because Maseo had been in an ARGUS lockup by then, she couldn't find him. He'd been as good as dead — wiped off every public record, erased for ARGUS purposes (the indefinite detention type).

Two months.

Oliver's memory-wipe was going on three.

The sea air swelled around her, cooling the sweat on her arms and at the back of her neck. She closed her eyes and breathed. Three deep breaths could make a world of difference, and she needed them to.

If she called Oliver, right now — and God, did she want to — he wouldn't know her. If Oliver really did remember her — even out of the blue — he would have called. She had that much confidence in them, at the very least, to know that he would call her, even if it was just to hear her voice. Even then, she would have heard from Diggle — from Roy — somebody.

After a long, long pause, she quietly slipped her phone back into her purse and rested her elbows on the rail. There was a colorful pinwheel in her bag, a souvenir she'd bought for little Sara — and for other reasons too. She took it out now, blowing on it silently to watch the wheel move with a swirl of fall reds and cobalt blues.

She stared down at the water, still without any earthly idea of what anything meant — whether it meant that Oliver was a lost cause — whether it meant she still had reason to hope —

She got her phone out again. To hell with it. It was a good sign, a reason to hope. She yelped when it started buzzing — even before she'd even pushed a button.

"ESP," she muttered to herself. "It finally happe— wait —"

Felicity saw the name on the display. Perfect timing, as usual.
"Hey," she said, schooling her voice to something less...traumatized. "What's up?"

"Just called to tell you that the lunch went okay — no bloodshed, steak knives or otherwise."

"Why are you out of breath?" she asked. "You didn't do some salmon ladder to impress the investors — right? Because that would be crossing a line."

Ray laughed. "No — I'm on a treadmill. Hotel has a decent gym."

Right. Ray usually worked out after wrapping up something important, part of his success strategy. Felicity personally thought something normal like a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream was infinitely more motivating than a moving rubber strip, but then again, she thought that treadmills and gyms taunted her (covertly).

"You should check it out," he continued, breathlessly. "I could teach you the whole salmon ladder thing — since you're inexplicably fascinated by it — I don't know why, I mean if you're looking for core strength, abdominal crunches are —"

"Ray —" she interrupted. "You're a eat-healthy live-healthy kind of guy, and kudos for that. But I am an ice-cream-for-dinner-in-front-of-trash-TV kind of girl, and I am not going to learn how to do the salmon ladder."

Because she was only fascinated by the person doing it.

But Ray didn't need to know — anything — about that part of her life.

"Okay, fair enough," said Ray, bouncing back to his main point so fast that she almost got whiplash. "Anyway, dinner tonight? Seven — Iggsy's? It's just in the hotel, highest floor. Amazing Japanese-style fusion — you're not allergic to fish — are you?"

"Uh," she said. Part of the whole deal — or lack thereof — with her and Ray was that they were friends. Period. Kiss or no kiss (that one time), and the heartbreaking explanation as to why he'd walked away after said kiss. Dinner at a fancy hotel, just the two of them was...very non-platonic.

"Felicity — fish allergy, yes or no?"

"Uh, no, but —"

"Purely platonic. It's about work."

"Work? Everything okay? I can come straight back if it's something we need to talk about —"

"It's work, but it's not work-work."

"That clears absolutely nothing up."

"Okay, so it's kinda serious, but not too serious. Kinda work-related, but also a smidge personal. Anyway, I'll meet you at 7 if it's a yes. Is it a yes?"

"Sure, but —?"

"Great, I'll see you then."

He hung up.

Felicity clutched the phone tight in her fist. "I am so fired," she said.
Felicity's eyes were starting to hurt from staring down at the elusive clasp on her necklace. The mirrors in the elevator showed about four Felicities, all struggling to fasten her necklace before she was late for a meet-up in the hotel she stayed at.

Movies made it look ridiculously easy. Either a shiny boyfriend in the background to help her fasten the clasp and kiss her shoulder (pshaw) or the clasp would never even *dream* about slipping out of her clumsy grip —

Phew. Finally.

With five floors to go, she straightened her shoulders in front of the reflective doors, smoothing the thin gold chain flat. The exact opposite of fancy. Her dress was knee-length and dark green, meant for business dinners instead of a conversation about being fired, delivered over a bowl of miso soup.

To be fair, after a decent amount of rationalization and appraisal of self-worth, Felicity decided there was about a 25% chance that Ray was going to fire her, but a 75% chance that he was going to say something about her work absence a few months back. Which she could handle — she'd been rehearsing the stories all day like she was going in for an interview (which she'd technically never had with Ray).

Her hair was loose around her bare shoulders (it was too hot in Singapore for anything else), and fell past her face as she stealthily checked her zipper to see that it was fastened.

*Whatever happens in there, you will be gracious and not spill anything,* she told herself, as the doors slid open with a soft *ding*, and released her onto the top floor of the hotel.

Fancy. She could only see a little of the view through the gauzy curtains, but the 5% looked breathtaking. Ray was already waiting for her, tall and lithe in a navy blue suit, one hand in his pocket and the other thumbing the screen on his phone. He looked so focused, she almost felt bad for tapping him on the shoulder.

"Hi," she said, trying not to show how antsy she was getting.

"You look fantastic," he said, and she flushed, in spite of herself.

But Ray smiled — he always looked better with a smile — and gestured towards the restaurant. "Shall we?"

Felicity hadn't guessed wrong. The view *was* spectacular. The Ferris wheel across the bay and the skyscrapers were all coordinated to light up in the same color spectrum, glazing the mirror-dark water in the bay shades of ethereal purple and jellyfish blue.

"Pretty amazing, isn't it?" said Ray, from opposite the table.

"Absolutely," she murmured, still a little awestruck. "I need to start traveling more."

"Weren't you doing that during your long vacation-slash-disappearance?" Ray asked, looking genuinely interested as opposed to snippy about her impromptu sabbatical.

Well. Technically, she'd been to exactly two foreign countries, well — three — depending on whether Tibet counted as its own country or part of China. The UK — well — that stay had ended with a private jet and a drugged vigilante, so she wasn't exactly eager to explain. Any of it.
"Uh, I didn't have a lot — when I was growing up," she said, flipping through the menu without reading the words. "Didn't get to travel much."

Instead of doing the understanding nod, Ray leaned forward in his seat, his eyes bright. "Okay, given my lack of conversational skills, I can't in good conscience ignore the perfect segue into what I was about to ask you. I mean — I was gonna wait until the main course — but it's pretty big, and you should probably have as much time as possible to mull over it."

"Wait." Felicity froze mid-page-flip. "You're not firing me?"

Ray's eyebrows shot up — way — up. "What?"

They both fell silent when the waiter came over with their bottle of wine.

"First of all," he said, as the waiter disappeared after filling their wineglasses. "I'm not going to fire you — I mean, you're indispensable to the company, so terminating you is basically business suicide, plus I actually like you and think of you as a friend — wait — is that why you look so nervous? I thought it was because I kissed you that one time, after we had dinner and I came back to get the necklace —"

"— I remember how things went down last time," Felicity interrupted. "No — not that — well, maybe a little that — I just thought that after the way I disappeared three months ago, you decided to hire yourself a new VP, i.e. terminating this one. Isn't this why we're having the nice dinner? So I don't give your legal department hell? Which I wouldn't, by the way — I'd just hack into their servers and wipe everything they have."

Ray spluttered into his wine glass. "Good to know," he said, clearing his throat. "Look — no — I'd never fire you. You're my friend and I legitimately enjoy coming into work because I know you're going to be there too. I could pinky-swear, if you wanted. I'm aware of how humiliating it is for a grown man to do it, under the circumstances, but if that's the flaming hoop I have to jump through, then I'll get up right now and raise my pinky —"

Felicity stopped him, laughing in spite of herself. "Tempted, really tempted," she said, pushing his hands back onto the table. "So if you're not firing me — what's this all about?"

Ray reached into his suit pocket, and Felicity legitimately felt her whole body freeze, until her brain caught up and gave her a mental smack (if that was even possible). Ray was a friend. A friend she'd kissed once — and pretty much regretted immediately. Work lunches and a business partnership didn't mean that he was going to pop the question sans the obligatory six-to-nine months of dating first.

Plus, his ghost was Anna — the fiancée Felicity had never met but knew he mourned. So no, Ray was not going to ask her anything remotely ring-related.

And he didn't.

Because he slid a tiny something across the table towards her. A microchip. Which she picked up by the corners, holding it as gingerly as if it was a live grenade.

"It's a nanite chip," Ray said, his gaze fixed on the chip he'd just passed to her. "I'm having trouble getting it to function."

Felicity raised her eyebrows. "Function for what?"

"Right," he said, sheepishly, reaching for his wine glass. "That."
"This," said Felicity, "is — not — a good idea."

"Well let's not get ahead of ourselves — or protect my self-esteem — here," Ray answered, patiently. "I can't get it to work, anyway. Not without your help."

"For your metal death suit. The one you're going to use to fight crime. As a vigilante."

Holy frack. She fell back in her chair, gripping the arms of the seat so tightly she was worried something was going to break — either the wood or her fingers. What was it with billionaires and their inexplicable desire to fight crime? Like it was so hard to just sit back on their money and not try to die.

"Ray," she said, in a voice wound tight by strain and secrets that she couldn't tell him, because they weren't hers to tell. "You're going to kill yourself. And as if that's not bad enough — you're asking me to help you."

"So that's a no?" he said, dryly.

"This isn't funny. You're a businessman, you're a genius, and you're a pretty good people person — if you moderate the babble — but you're not a vigilante. Some things are just — just —"

"— left to the Arrow and his partners? The red guy and the woman in the blonde wig and black mask?" he observed, once again catching her train of thought.

Felicity bit the inside of her mouth, hard enough to taste blood.

"Those guys have training, training the US Armed Forces can't fathom — training you've never had. They take on crime in the streets and sometimes they don't come back. The Arrow disappeared for a whole year — where do you think —"

"You saw the headlines, the rallies," Ray answered, stubbornly. "He came back. He always comes back. That's the kind of sacrifice he's making out there, that's the kind of battle he shouldn't have to fight alone."

"Because you want to send him a CV?"

They were very nearly arguing, hushed voices tense with strain, in a very fancy restaurant overlooking a beautiful city. After a pause — during which they both drained their wineglasses, instead of touching the food on their plates — Ray leaned forward, intent on trying again.

"Felicity," he said. "You're the smartest person I know. You're the only person I trust in Starling City — the only person I've trusted enough since — since Anna. I told you what happened when the city was taken over last time — don't want to feel that powerless again, and when the city came under attack again, I was. But the Arrow wasn't — he never is."

Felicity looked away from the window, at Ray. There was a heartbreaking earnestness in his eyes, a truth she couldn't bury under the pain of what had happened — what was probably still happening — to Oliver as the vigilante.

"You're the only person who could make this work, and I know that I could do this if I had you on my team. It'd be the two of us against the corruption in Starling City — the catalysts for some real change in a city that's ready for it — we'd be doing some real good."

"What change?" Felicity was still pleaded for him to see sense, to see that being a vigilante wasn't
going to bring anyone back — wasn't going to stop the hurt but just make it worse — infinitely worse.

"You saw the way they stood up against the terrorist attacks. The Arrow started something — he's made people brave, he's made them stand up for their city. I'm just one of the people he's proved that to. I want to protect Starling City — because I know I can."

Felicity swallowed another mouthful of her drink. Ray was the more extreme example of the very real movement she'd seen from the League of Assassins attack. Starling was getting better, its darkness shrinking, and she couldn't deny that Oliver had something to do with it.

Here she was, telling Ray not to take risks when she'd fought Oliver three months ago on the exact same subject. He hadn't wanted the people of Starling City to take the risks he should have been shouldering himself. If Ray could be out there, helping Oliver, wouldn't there be less risk to go around? Wouldn't Oliver be safer?

But at what cost to Ray?

Felicity didn't know. She didn't know why she was even hesitating, when in her mind Oliver had always come first — his safety, bringing him home to the Foundry. The priorities. Ray could never match what she'd felt for Oliver — never, never in her mind could that ever happen.

So why was Ray changing her mind?

Maybe because she saw in Ray what she'd wished a thousand times for Oliver to do — listen, not to take risks, to for once think of himself. Maybe she felt that deep down, losing Oliver and what they'd had was something she'd never get over. Maybe there was a hubristic urge in her to correct — to guide him — in the right direction. To make sure he wasn't another vigilante who never came back.

Felicity reached out, holding the nanite chip between them, hovering like a promise not yet made. She met his eyes, blue into black. "What are really you asking of me?" she said, slowly.

"Well, the foremost researcher in nanite technology and advanced weaponry agreed to meet with me — to work with me on the theory. You'll be working with us both, developing the suit, putting everything together. But," he added, "there's a little catch. Well, if three hundred and sixty-five days counts as little."

Felicity was very still, waiting for it.

"The guy's teaching in London — Professor Alpheus Hyatt. He taught me in college and he's a complete genius — complete expert in the field, so if anyone has a chance of making sure that I survive this, it's him. But it also means — that if you say yes to helping — I want you to move to London with me."

Felicity turned her gaze to the window, at the lights in the bay — ghostly now. Working for ARGUS — now Ray, asking her to be the vigilante's partner. In London.

The choices were piling up, paths presenting themselves beneath her stalling feet. So many decisions that could take her away from Starling City — and a world away from Oliver. Who she still nursed a glimmer of hope for, hope that he would remember.

But didn't she promise to live her life in the meantime? Would she stay still, waiting for something that had a very real possibility of not ever materializing? At the moment, at this instant, she was staring at a closed door she didn't have the key to, waiting for Oliver to open it.
Felicity believed in miracles — she'd just seen one, Maseo reunited with his family.

And Oliver.

Oliver.

If anyone could pull off a miracle, it was Oliver. He'd done it before, countless times before. Beating insurmountable odds, facing impossible roadblocks.

Choices, paths, decisions.

Ray held her gaze when she turned back to face him. "Felicity — what do you say?"

Chapter End Notes

(1) First of all, if Ray does not sound like the Ray on the show, I make no apologies. I personally like him better this way (reasons below).

(2) *Brace for long rant here* In principle, I don't hate Ray or a love triangle, I just don't like it when the CW does love triangles (I'm looking at you, Vampire Diaries). I also think Barry is a more likable option than Ray (if he wasn't on his own show), for obvious reasons. Ray's become more likable (ish) in the last few episodes, but I stand by the fact that he started out as a stalker and he has crazy chipmunk eyes and for a guy who's still heartbroken over his fiancee he's moving on REMARKABLY quickly. (I think it's the writing, they're rushing it to the point that I feel too many things are happening at once, and in the first episode they made him seem like the antagonist and it kind of stuck).

(3) Plus, Sara and Felicity were never really part of a love triangle, and I thought that was so much stronger. To see two women be friends regardless of who's dating/sleeping with who is so much stronger than watching two guys have a pissing contest over a prize (even though a part of me DOES like to see Oliver jealous). In short, I prefer friendships over romantic rivalry because when the CW does it, there's a tendency for it to get played out and involve character 180s (aherm, Elena Gilbert).

Anyways, yes. Hello. Sorry about that. Please don't kill me after this chapter. There's always hope, ok? (Pats your shoulder gently) 3x12!
Begin Again

Chapter Notes

Hah you'll be proud of me. I took a little break from writing to addict one of my friends to Arrow/Olicity. BWAHAHAHAHAHA. We got another one guys :D It's gotten to the point that she can't fantasize about being with Oliver because she wants him to end up with Felicity.

To clarify, by six months later I mean six months since Oliver went blank on Felicity. Cheers.

Also, this update was slower than usual because I was trying to get the ending (THE ending) right. I shit you not, the last few days I have been subsisting on rice and vegetables and salted fish. But more on that later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six Months Later

Oliver inhaled deeply as he looked out over the Starling City skyline. Even though he had long since memorized the view from his nightly activities as the Arrow, it'd been a while since he'd seen his city in the daylight.

Or from the brand new headquarters of Queen Incorporated.

"Oliver," said Walter, rearranging a pile of documents neatly under his arm. "There's no reason to be standing on ceremony — you've done very well today."

Oliver smiled at the man who'd once been his stepfather. "We have," he corrected. "Thank you, Walter."

Walter inclined his head at the praise, coming to stand with Oliver by the windows. He sighed, staring out into the fading light. "I wish Moira could have been around to see this — see the work you've put into this — your own company. It would have made her very proud."

Oliver slipped his hands into his pockets, glancing at his feet in a latent sign of nervousness. "I'm not sure she would have agreed with me keeping the company private — I remember her telling me how Queen Consolidated broke all the records when it first came onto the stock exchange."

"I disagree," said Walter, calmly patting the sheaf of papers under his arm. "IPOs and investors are all well and good, but in the end — a public company in the hands of the shareholders is a business run for short-term profit. Shareholders want revenue and they want it soon. A private company is about the long run. Keeping Queen Incorporated private ensures that the vision you have — a worthy one, mind you — has a real chance of becoming something quite tangible."

Oliver had to agree. It was a well-worn discussion, one he'd had with Walter over the long period of drafting and planning the way forward. Shareholders like the ones who'd invested in QC tended to be scared off by any mention of the Glades — even with a detailed analysis of why bringing high-worth innovation and manufacturing industries to the area was a good idea. Rents on factory space
were cheap, and people needed jobs, but the earthquake and the terrorist attacks had diminished enthusiasm in businessmen unwilling to take risks.

"If I had to admit one concern," said Walter, "it would be the security of it all. The Glades can be a rough area — I just hope our new employees don't have too much trouble."

Oliver turned back to the window, hiding a smile. "Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about that," he said. "I heard the Arrow's been cleaning up the Glades."

"Oh, yes — quite right." Walter averted his eyes from the glare of the setting sun. "Interesting fellow — the Arrow. I must admit, I had rather a dim view of him after he threatened your mother, but I must say that he's wrought some long-overdue change in the city."

"If we make a profit in our first year," Oliver said, jokingly, "maybe we should sponsor his therapy sessions."

Walter laughed. "Quite right."

"In all seriousness," said Oliver, earnestly. "It's a risk, Walter, and I have to thank you for sticking your neck out for me. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think I could do it — and whatever happened in the past, with Queen Consolidated — I mean for Queen Incorporated to be different. It's not just about the prestige or a family legacy anymore. It's about what I believe I can do for the city."

Walter waited patiently for Oliver to finish. He was a naturally quiet man, more prone to quiet observations than pronounced judgments, so his word carried more weight with Oliver than half of QC's old Board of Directors.

"All ventures carry risk, Oliver. There can be no gain without the sacrifice of liability. But — if you work as long in the business as I have, you learn to tell a worthy risk from a wealth of liabilities incurred for hollow gain. Your vision may seem like a pet project to some, Lord knows that doing business while revitalizing the Glades hardly seems to be on anybody's agenda right now, not even the government's. But the few investors you need, they — like me — believe that Starling City is a city worth saving, however long it may take."

Oliver had to smile at the thought, because his parents had been — arguably — shrewd business minds over anything else. He couldn't imagine their reactions if they found out their son's business plan — post-losing their family legacy to an outsider like Ray Palmer — was to shift focus to one of the traditionally decrepit areas of a flourishing city.

Walter smiled. "You may not know this — but Queen Consolidated's business plan used to be something quite similar, until times grew hard and more pragmatic agendas were adopted. I think — as the objective observer, not as your ex-stepfather — that your parents would have been very, very proud of what you have chosen to do. Your heart wasn't in Queen Consolidated, even I could see that. I admit, that had you shown the same reticence with your current venture, I would have stepped away. But you have changed. I can see that you want this — and I wouldn't dream of abandoning you now."

For a moment, Oliver couldn't think of anything to say — to the level of candor Walter had extended him — to the fact that Walter, in spite of what he knew about Oliver's history as a CEO, genuinely and truly believed in him.

So he settled for the truth.

"I won't let you down, Walter," he said, and held out his hand.
Walter smiled and gripped it in a firm handshake. "I don't doubt it."

"Now, I would drink a toast to that," Walter added, casting a glance at his watch. "Unfortunately, I think we ought to save the drinks for tonight's celebrations, don't you?"

Ah. Oliver had almost forgotten about the private event they were hosting for their small group of shareholders. It was hardly to the historical standard of Queen family events, but Oliver was all right with that. It was a quiet celebration meant to celebrate a genuine success, because there didn't need to be any flashiness to overshadow their pride in a good cause.

"I'll hold you to that," he answered.

Walter started to go, but then he turned back, adjusting the sleeve of his jacket. "I had hoped," he said, "that Miss Smoak might join us at the event. I'd been keeping an eye on her for some time, and I'm very proud of her success in Palmer Technologies. Very well-deserved."

"Right." Oliver recalled a Felicity Smoak more vividly than he would have let on, but he wasn't sure how Walter knew her. Probably from his Queen Consolidated days. "I'm sure it is."

Walter gave him an odd look. "I didn't realize you'd fallen out. I was under the impression that you two were quite close."

Oliver shook his head. "Not in particular."

"I must have been mistaken, then." Walter made his way towards the doors, shaking his head thoughtfully. "Bright girl. I spoke quite highly of her in front of Moira — she agreed."

The glass doors whooshed shut behind him, leaving Oliver alone with his thoughts — and an increasingly uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Rain drummed on the roof of Felicity's umbrella, darkening the shoulders of her red coat with wet. She lifted the rim of her dripping umbrella, showering the puddles beside her with tiny ripples. The rain had lightened to a steady drizzle, the air clearing enough for her to see what she'd been looking for.

The stone crest on a rain-washed building.

A busy London road.

Where everything had started again.

Felicity almost saw the ghosts of the protesters and the neon yellow police coats, the rising fury of a crowd, a soulless man they'd tried to save because the act of killing him would have deprived their friend of his. It was the place where she'd stood and — for a second — doubted Oliver's humanity, a place where she'd almost — almost — lost hope.

Until she'd stood in his way to remind him exactly what was at stake, because somehow, without even realizing it — she'd become his conscience. Because he'd always listened to her — trusted her. Found his way back to her.

Today it was just a street. Wet. Busy with people — people with places to go, offices to be. And her — grasping at straws. Trying to feel something, a tiny reassurance of something that didn't exist. She didn't know what she'd been expecting. The sound of her name — in the one voice she wanted to hear — turning around in the middle of the street to find Oliver standing right there. And he'd still
know her — still be in love with her.

But of course he wasn't.

Felicity blew her breath out in a cloud of steam and pretended she was a fiery dragon. Pretended that she was about to make a decision, a big one, even though she was nowhere close. She'd been helping Ray from Starling City anyway, helping him with the computer programming side of things while he worked on the actual *ka-pow* stuff with the Professor. It was like she had a slightly eccentric pen pal. The real question was whether she wanted to get into the vigilante world again — after Ray got back to Starling City.

*That* was a little harder.

But nothing ever seemed to stand still with her, not for too long. Her phone buzzed and reminded her that she had some place to be, so she turned to go. The umbrella spun in her hands, swirling through the haze of rain as she went.

"Not bad, right?"

Felicity looked up from her tub of Ben & Jerry's ice cream — mint chocolate cookie. Ray eyed her expectantly over his steaming cup of coffee. They were in his office, the swanky London headquarters for his company…which somehow had a freezer stocked with ice cream.

"Ben & Jerry's tastes good anywhere," she said, digging in her spoon for another brain-freeze-inducing hit of pure sugary genius.

"*Ergo,*" said Ray, raising his arms. "Move to London."

Felicity only reached for the laptop, swinging it around so that she could type with the spoon in her mouth. Her visit was only for a few days — something of a trial period/vacation. Regardless of how noble Ray's save-the-city crusade sounded, the President and Vice-President of a company couldn't exactly leave at the same time, especially since the crusade was supposed to be a well-kept secret.

If she had a penny for every time a vigilante told her a secret, she'd have her own place in the Caymans.

Ray sighed. "Dammit. I thought I was gonna get you with the ice cream."

Felicity scanned through the log files on Ray's suit. Three months of workshopping with Professor Hyatt and a lot of late night emails had resulted in…Felicity raised her eyebrows at the visual rendering of his suit. "A-T-O-M," she read.

"Advanced Technology Operating Mechanism." Ray set his cup back on the table and keyed in a passcode at the corner of the glass. Felicity jumped in her chair when the table lit up like a Christmas tree, sending up a full holographic rendering of what looked like a pretty fancy suit of armor.

"At this point, I only have the gauntlets, but they don't blow up anymore, so that's a good sign." Ray scratched the back of his head.

"Pretty auspicious," she agreed, spinning one of the holographic pieces like a top. "Just how much firepower is this thing going to pack?"

Ray swept his hand along the glass, flashing through a pretty hefty arsenal of military-grade weaponry.
"Was that a tank?"

He shrugged. "Probably. Fitting a bazooka's firepower into the palm of my hand is tough enough — I figured I'd worry about the tank later."

Felicity glanced at him. The stark contrast of light and shadow only threw the dark circles under his eyes into sharp relief. He wasn't sleeping enough — working too many late nights on a project he couldn't seem to slow down.

"Ray," she said, quietly, coming around the table. "You're supposed to save people with this suit — not lose yourself with it."

"I've got it handled."

Felicity shook her head. She knew that look — knew it from Oliver. Too much ruminating, not enough rest, the single-minded push on a body that was only human. Ray was hurtling down the same path that Oliver had — and he didn't have crazy kung fu to fall back on if his suit failed in the field.

"Try that without the mad scientist look in your eye. It's eating you alive," she said, pressing her point. "You need to slow down."

"Slow down isn't exactly my style." Ray stared at the suit, so Felicity pushed it out of the way — way out of holographic range. She hoped she hadn't accidentally deleted everything, but she was making a point.

"If you want to live the life of a vigilante and still be Ray Palmer, CEO of Palmer Technologies, then you need to learn how. People will start to ask questions if you look half-dead on your feet every morning, and you may be a good liar, but you won't be able to hide bullet wounds and broken arms if you don't stop to think about yourself."

Instead of getting the blowback she'd come to expect from Oliver, Ray only folded his arms and looked at her — like looked. Intently.

Felicity had a funny (AKA shivery) feeling that she wasn't going to like the question.

"How do you know?" Ray asked, suddenly. His tone wasn't unpleasant, it was just curious. "You talk as if you've seen firsthand what being a vigilante is like — so my question is — how do you know?"

When Felicity didn't say anything, Ray nodded, as if she'd confirmed a suspicion of his, and leaned against the table. "I had a hunch," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets. "I mean — it's not an everyday occurrence, mind you — me telling a friend that I want to suit up in an advanced exosuit to fight crime, save the city — so maybe I'm reading this wrong. But you seemed a lot less surprised than I thought the average person should be. Now, granted, you're by no means ordinary, but even for someone as smart as you are — that's not the boilerplate reaction to being told that your friend wants to be vigilante."

Felicity considered — for a millisecond — how she'd lie about it, how she'd try to spin a story with her less-than-stellar abilities at deception. But she felt, given what Ray had already told her, what he'd trusted her with…she owed him that much. Honesty — about her part in it, not the secrets that weren't hers to share.

And to Ray's credit — he didn't ask for a name.
Felicity came around to Ray's side of the table and rested her weight on the edge, the both of them staring at the far wall. "It's complicated."

Ray looked at her. "Is that what's keeping you in Starling? Someone already asked you to be his-slash-her partner in crime?"

This was starting to sound like a prom proposal.

"Like I said," she sighed. "It's complicated."

"So that's a yes." Ray blew out his breath, slowly. "Whoa. Did not think the Starling City Vigilante had partners. I always thought it was just him on that bike. And the red version of himself. Huh. I guess he does have partners."

"Ray…"

"I'm guessing you watch him get hurt a lot, huh?"

Felicity nodded, silently.

"You care about him?"

"More than he knows," Felicity said, and it occurred to he that she'd never thought about lying — not about that.

"So why have you been helping me with the suit — if you're busy helping the Arrow too?"

"Helped," she said. "We're not exactly on speaking terms anymore."

"Bad breakup?"

"Difficult choices. I walked away — I think." Felicity wasn't sure if memory loss counted as someone walking away, and to be brutally honest, what she'd done to Oliver constituted a big shove.

"Tough to let go, isn't it?" There was a kind of poignant understanding between them — even though they knew less than everything about each other, they didn't have to. Losing a loved one wasn't something that needed to be described, not to someone who'd been there.

"Maybe that's a good thing," she said, softly. "Anna shouldn't be reminding you of how powerless you were — but how strong you already are. If you're fighting for her, don't just fight in her honor — live in her honor. You have to learn how, Ray — you just have to."

Ray powered down the table and reached across for the tub of ice cream, sliding it over to Felicity in the half-darkness.

"Felicity Smoak," he said, holding out a spoon. "I do believe you've talked some sense into me."

Felicity smiled, and lifted herself so that she was sitting on the table, tub of ice cream on her knees. Ray smiled back — a smile with plenty of sadness in it, mirroring hers — and poured himself more coffee. They sat side by side in ponderous silence, both of them gazing off into the darkness, thinking of the loves they'd lost.

"So will you?" Ray asked, and she knew that he was looking at her.

Felicity was about to answer when she heard her phone buzz — at the same time as Ray's did.
"News alert," he said. "Something's happened in the Glades."

But Felicity wasn't listening, because she was reading Diggle's message.

"No way," she breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Dun-dun-dun.

Anyways, songs for this chapter (because it's fun to think about these things)

The Funeral - Band of Horses
C'est La Mort - The Civil Wars
Boats & Birds - Gregory & the Hawk
Diggle remembered the last time they'd all stood in front of the monitors, watching the news in mute horror. It'd involved a psychopathic assassin who'd strung up bodies all over Starling City. Now it was another kind of psychopath.

"Brick's gone insane," Roy said, gripping the back of Felicity's empty chair so tightly that he heard the leather creak. "He knows we've flushed most of his guys from the Glades — so why —?"

"Desperation." Oliver's arms were folded. He was still wearing the tux he'd worn to the Queen Incorporated event — they all were, because they'd rushed straight to the Foundry as soon as they could get away. "We had them on the run. It was a smart move — kidnapping the aldermen. It makes sure everyone's watching, and it puts public pressure on the mayor to get them back."

Diggle forgot how peppy Oliver could be in times of crisis. "That's great news for Danny Brickwell, but the aldermen still need our help, and Brick's men are about to overrun the police in the Glades."

"Roy," said Oliver, "any luck tracking them?"

"Uh —" Roy slid into Felicity's chair with nothing of his usual grace, as if he was discomfited about taking her spot. "I've been running facial recognition, but Brick's men took down the cell towers and disabled most of the traffic cams —"

"Find them," said Oliver, reaching for his bow. "I'm heading into the Glades — I'll try to calm the situation down."

Diggle glanced at the time. "Are you sure that's the best thing to do?"

"It's the only thing to do." Oliver was already heading up the stairs. "Talk me in."

As soon as the door slammed, Roy sagged in his chair. "I'm running out of tech babble. Brick's men in the streets — we can handle. But we can't find the aldermen without her."

"I know." Diggle pulled his phone out, checking his last message from Felicity. "But she's only landing in an hour."

Roy sprang to his feet anyway. "I'm getting Sin. Between the both of us, we can get enough people to rally — keep Brick's men busy until Felicity figures out how to track them."

Diggle slid a Glock into his belt. "Let's hope she can."

"Otherwise I'm gonna have to come clean to Oliver that I have no idea what I'm doing — and then he can kill us both," Roy answered. "Are we sure about nixing my plan — the one where I hit him really hard in the head until he remembers Felicity?"

"Ask me again in an hour," said Diggle, grimly.

If she weren't terrified of heights, Felicity wouldn't have minded looking out over Starling City from the window of a private plane. Unfortunately, she had a madman to catch — a psychopath who'd decided to hold Starling City ransom by seizing its leadership.
The city really couldn't catch a break. Malcolm Merlyn. Slade/Deathstroke. Ra's al Ghul. Brick. What kind of super villain name was **Brick** anyway? Was the guy at least orange?

"You shouldn't be here," said Felicity, typing so fast that the keys on her computer were starting to feel like loose tiles. "Your suit's not ready."

Ray knocked on the case beside him, looking anything but intimidated. "Perfect way to find out," he said. "Trial on the streets."

"How's your aim?" she asked.

"Not as good as the Arrow's," he said, pointedly, "but there's enough firepower in the gauntlets alone to blow up a building."

Felicity shook her head. "Unfortunately, I think Brick having three aldermen in his grasp kind of rules out the pyrotechnics."

"True — but that's why your friend needs you back in Starling City, right?" Ray's eyes glinted with a little too much understanding. "You can track him down."

"Trying," she said, through her teeth. "I can't turn the traffic cams back on, and satellites are finding plenty of Brick's men in the Glades but the guy's smart enough to stay indoors."

"Can't you trace his communications?" Ray asked, leaning over to look at her screen. "He has to be making calls if he's trying to take over a whole district of Starling City."

A sharp jerk of her head. "Cell towers went down first — I'd be surprised if they're even — *wait* —"

The plane jolted when it hit the runway, the impact rattling her teeth as the wheels slowed into a gentle glide. But she was already pursuing her train of thought.

No cellphones.

*Radio.*

"A ski mask, really?" said Felicity, watching as Ray pulled one over his face. Even with one hand on the wheel, the eyeholes lined up perfectly. Damn.

"Haven't finished the face guard yet," he said, sounding unusually chipper for someone about to walk into a war zone without tested weapons. "Can't have everyone knowing my secret identity."

"Ray, *please* go back to the office."

"It's a really long cab ride back to London."

"Ray."

"Felicity — they have three of the aldermen. I can't just sit back *knowing* that I have the means to help — and neither can you. We're both *really* stubborn people, and I think it's time we acknowledge that neither of us are good at staying out of fights, especially if they involve psychopaths trying to take over the city."

They stared at each other, neither of them willing to back down.

"Fine," said Felicity. "*Fine.* Take a right on the next street and park it. I will hack into police dispatch
and tell you where the trouble is — then you will drive responsibly towards that location and help.”

"Absolutely. And when you find Brick —"

"You are not taking on Brick, not without your metal death suit."

"Technically —"

But Felicity was already calling Diggle.

Diggle swerved to avoid a few of Brick's men, the pinging off the van walls telling him that they'd shot back — and they weren't stingy with their ammo. He hit the gas and tore out of the street, sparks flying from the ricocheting bullets.

Roy was on one side of the Glades with Sin and some urban backup, Oliver and Laurel on the other, pushing Brick's men off the street. They were shorthanded, and it was starting to show. Diggle couldn't run comms and fight and keep track of everyone at the same time — he'd just taken out a fleet of their cars to reduce Brick's mobility in the streets.

Unfortunately it meant that he was being chased by about a dozen gun-waving thugs. His earpiece crackled suddenly, and he almost crashed the van into a cop car.

"Dig!"

Diggle jerked the wheel, slamming a gang member halfway across the road. "Felicity — where are you?"

"On my way into the Glades — take the next left." Diggle followed her directions without thinking, used to her abrupt road directions. He could hear her typing, as if he was tracking him by GPS.

"You should get back to the Foundry, it's chaos out here in the streets."

She ignored him. "Straight through — careful, abandoned vehicles everywhere."

"Felicity, don't come. We're already shorthanded as is, you'll be on your own —"

"Stop."

Diggle automatically slammed on the brakes, screeching to an abrupt halt — in the middle of a chaotic street.

"Felicity, what —"

The van door slammed open, and Felicity climbed inside, as unreal as a hallucination against the backdrop of a city going mad.

"Hi, Dig," she said, breathlessly.

"Who is — is that Palmer?" said Diggle, looking incredulously through the van window.

"Very long story," said Felicity, slamming the door shut behind her. "Let's just say that I'm playing for two teams on this one — and neither of you know the positions — or equipment — sports stuff —"
God, she had to work on her sports analogies.

Diggle pulled her in for a hug, nearly winding her. "It's good to see you again."

"You saw me last week for lunch," she said, a little affronted.

"I mean that it's been a while since the team got back together," said Diggle.

Felicity made a sound through her nose, pulling up her map of the Glades on the computer. "One-quarter of the team doesn't even know I exist — but sure, just like old times. All-out war for the Glades."

In spite of the fires and the looting and the general mayhem, Diggle looked disproportionately calm, as if he had more faith than she did — that everything was going to turn out okay. "Did you find out where he's keeping the aldermen?" he asked.

Felicity scanned the map for the GPS trackers in Oliver and Roy's suits. "Think so. Since the cell towers went down, Brick has to be keeping in touch with his people somehow. My guess was radio — and bingo — I hacked into Brick's frequency. He's keeping the aldermen in three separate locations — so you, Roy, and Oliver each have one lucky council member to save."

Diggle started the van. "Where to?" he asked.

"Straight ahead — cut to Old Street," she said, without looking up from her computer. The map of the Glades was a mess of colors — red for trouble zones, green for safe areas, and right then, the Glades was as red as Soviet Russia.

Felicity shook her head, feeling a rising sense of despair. "How did this happen, Dig? We had Starling City on the mend — how did everything just —"

"Go to hell?" Diggle finished, sharply avoiding an impromptu roadblock. "I don't know, Felicity. But ever since you stopped coming down to the Foundry, things have been slipping through the cracks."

"That's not..." Felicity shook her head, a lump rising in her throat. "He started without my help, and he's been doing fine. What happened between me and Oliver doesn't affect the city — it never has."

Diggle met her eyes briefly in the rearview mirror. "We both know that's not true," he said, and Felicity didn't know how to respond.

Oliver crashed through a window, crunching over broken glass as he rolled to a stop inside a derelict building, where one of the hostages was supposedly being kept. According to Diggle.

"How do you know this, exactly?" he asked, one hand on his earpiece.

Diggle grunted, like he'd just landed from a jump. "Roy had a breakthrough — tracked them by the walkie talkies they're using to communicate."

"Right," said Oliver, the skepticism creeping into his voice. "Roy did it."

"Trust me, Oliver, one day — we'll laugh about this."

Oliver reached for an arrow, now with the unmistakable sense that Diggle and Roy knew a lot more than they were letting on. But he didn't have time for that, not right now. Gunfire shattered the wall above his head, showering him with dust.
Oliver spun and fired at Brick's men.

"I hope so," he answered.

"Two aldermen in police custody," said Felicity, huddled at the back of the van as she watched everyone's progress. "Roy — yours is the last. Anyone have eyes on Brick?"

"Negative — I just met up with Laurel — she's taken care of her side, we're heading over to the next," said Diggle.

"No sign of hi — gargh!" Roy sounded like he'd been picked up and thrown. He got up with a curse, but Felicity was already working. Even with traffic cams down, storefronts and apartment buildings still had surveillance — antsy people trying to stay alive in a rough neighborhood — but she was still seeing less than she needed to, going in with one eye blind.

Felicity muted Roy's side of the comms as she patched into Ray's.

"Hey!" said Ray, sounding out of breath.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, immediately.

"No — gauntlets haven't combusted on me yet — but I really need to —" a minor explosion in the background "— work on the density specs. Lighten the load."

"Can you make it a few blocks south? Arsenal needs help."

"The football team? I agree, but —"

"Ray — three blocks south — the last aldermen's in there, but my friend needs help getting through Brick's security."

"GOTCHA."

Felicity switched channels. "Roy — hang tight — backup's on the way."

"How will I —" Roy fired at something and swung at something else, "— know if it's a friend?"

An explosion went off in the background. "Never mind," he said, and disconnected.

Felicity heard the telltale click of someone reconnecting to the line and was about to tell Diggle that she was looking for Brick, except —

"John — I found Brick — I —" There was a deafening crunch of body on concrete, and the sound of Oliver trying to get back on his feet.

"Here's the deal," said an unfamiliar voice, echoing in a vast space she couldn't see. "You take me down — you walk out alive. But I don't fancy your chances with that bow."

Felicity's hand jumped to her mouth. She was the only one still on the line, alone in listening to Oliver take on one of Starling's most brutal criminals.

There was another crash, and a faint hiss, like gas escaping from a tight space.

"Vertigo," Oliver croaked, and Felicity's hands balled into tight fists as she listened — she could only listen.
Get up.

Oliver, get up.

Please.

Chapter End Notes

Had to engineer a crisis to get Felicity back to Starling. Borrowed some stuff off the recent ep.

3x12 thoughts:
- Someone kill me. Seriously. Those last ten minutes had me going oh shit oh shit oh shit. Oliver - go win Felicity back or GARGHHHHHHH

- The way I see it, the number of logical fallacies and WTFs in the last episode just means that the writers can't find any *logical* reasons to keep Oliver and Felicity apart and they're literally resorting to pulling fairy excuses out of their asses. *mic drop*

- Excuse me, I am VERY angry. But to be fair, I slant very heavily towards Felicity on this one. Oliver is being an idiot.

Oliver's lucky he's back from the dead in this fic, otherwise I'd have been tempted to keep him that way. Or have someone crack him over the skull so hard he sees stars.

Conclusion: GARGHHHHHHH
Oliver couldn't breathe. His pulse raced — unnaturally quick — his throat was constricting, his vision blurring as his body tried to fight off the effects of the drug.

Vertigo.

It always came back to bite.

The inside of the abandoned hall was dark, lit only by sputtering bulbs hanging from frayed wires. Oliver's peripheral vision detected movement and he ducked, fast enough to evade the fist that buried itself in the wall above his head, hard enough to dent the metal. Oliver had faced Ra's al Ghul — and he'd lived to fight another day. Danny Brickwell was a thug compared to Ra's' deadly skill, a blunt instrument to the finesse of a honed arrow. But Vertigo had dulled Oliver's edge, giving Brick the advantage.

Oliver sensed another blow and he rolled aside, shooting an arrow into the rafters and swinging out of the way. He grasped at the metal beams and tried to regain his balance, even as his footholds shifted and rolled beneath him.

"You're wondering how I got my hands on the Vertigo — since you and your little trick-or-treater friends flushed it out of the Glades," Brick roared, his voice echoing ten, twenty times over in his distorted senses. "See — your Robin Hood act ain't that popular in this part of town — so I cut myself a little deal with pretty much every criminal who's still got some balls. They help me take you down — once and for all — and I take over the Glades, give 'em a nice cut. A piece of your head — if they want it, special delivery."

"You've lost the hostages," Oliver said, crouching above him in the shadowy rafters, hiding the fact that he was losing his equilibrium, that the edges of his vision were pulsing from the Vertigo. "It's over, Brick. Come quietly."

"Or what?" Brick bellowed with laughter. "I figure you'll be too busy wetting yourself once the hallucinations kick in — right about now."

John. He needed to warn Diggle — about the Vertigo —

"It's over!" Oliver shouted. "You've lost your only leverage."

"It's over," growled a familiar voice, "when I say it's over!"

Oliver felt a blade sweep his chest. He twisted just in time and caught the sword on his bow. He rose to his feet — unsteadily — and stared into the shadows in front of him, as Slade stepped slowly into the pool of light.

"You never learn," he snarled. "Kid."

Suddenly he was falling, the ground rushing up to meet him — until it wasn't — not anymore — and Oliver found himself in a familiar darkness.

The pit.
Oliver was back in the pit again, feeling the stones against his back and the lashing hatred of his ghosts. He knew them by heart, as if their names were branded into the back of his skull — but this time, they were joined by another.

"Oliver Queen," said Ra's, the tip of his sword scraping across the stone floor. "Did you truly think that death would end the Demon?"

You can't trust your senses.

Oliver felt the rush of air from an incoming attack and ducked, rolling clean out of the way before the ground shook beneath him from a missed blow. He hit the wall and forced himself to stand, even while the air around him pulsed like a mirage.

"I killed you," he panted. "You're dead."

"No," Ra's answered. "Not you."

Oliver fired an arrow at this throat, but his sword sliced it to shreds. "I killed you," he growled, as if he could exorcise the ghost by forcing himself to remember that Ra's couldn't hurt him — not anymore.

"You forget about her," Ra's said, as if he could read Oliver's mind.

Her?

A blinding pain exploded along Oliver's back, and he was hurled forward, crashing into a mountain of crates. "What I have done — is what you lacked the courage to do. To fight for her!"

Oliver grabbed a splintered board and swung it through the air — a blade slashed it in two. Slade advanced on him, as murderous as the sword he raised high —

"Fight for her!" he roared, and Oliver parried his blow in a shower of sparks.

Fight for who?

A fist buried itself in Oliver's stomach, and he twisted to catch the next, grappling hand-to-hand with attackers he could barely see, and could only sense.

"What's the Arrow scared of?" said Brick, tauntingly. Then he threw Oliver across the room like it was nothing — like he was nothing, nothing at all.

Brick. If he could see him, the drug was starting to lose its potency. Oliver picked himself up, sliding into the shadows — where he had the advantage. His senses were already deceived by the drug, but shadow was a natural inhibitor — the earliest version of the fear toxin.

He raised his bow and shot — straight at the few, guttering lights. One by one, until the hall was plunged into darkness.

Brick faltered. Oliver could hear him, trying to find the bearings he'd lost when the light failed. Good. He reached for an arrow of his own, but before he could draw his bow, a phantom hand descended on the back of his neck and a blade burst from his chest — his heart.

Oliver gasped, choking on the taste of his own blood. He remembered this. Losing to Ra's, being impaled on his sword — feeling the blood rush away from his heart and salt the air with the tang of a fading life. Dying.
Oliver believed that ghosts only appeared when there was something he needed to know —
something he knew, but hadn't accepted — something buried deep beneath his conscious mind.

*Fight,* they'd hissed.

But fight for who?

He knew it was all linked, somehow. He'd fought Ra's al Ghul and lived — but he didn't know why.
Everything he'd done these last few months — with Queen Incorporated, as Oliver Queen, as the
Arrow — he'd been driven, but didn't know what drove him. Always — always something missing.

Why did he want to *live*?

"Oliver — OLIVER!"

Suddenly, Oliver knew it wasn't real. The sword — the wound — it was just a dream.

It was like he'd opened his eyes under deep water, that he'd been asleep for a long time. He gazed
into the faint, warm glow in the world above, and suddenly he felt himself rise through the darkness,
rushing onward and upward, until —

He rejoined the world again.

"*Felicity,*" he said, just as Brick's hands closed around his throat.

"Dig — Oliver needs help." Felicity's hands were shaking from holding the steering wheel so tightly.
"He found Brick and got hit with Vertigo — and not the fun kind. It's the see-your-worst-fears kind,
and he's going up against a human cinderblock."

"Copy that." Diggle fired his gun, twice. "We'll meet you at the warehouse — *do not* take on Brick
— Felicity, do you copy? Do not —"

Felicity didn't hear the next part, because she took a sharp right with a deafening shriek of protesting
tires. Too late. Because she'd tracked Oliver all the way to the warehouse, and she was about to
make a serious dent in the van's rental insurance.

She shoved the seatbelt into the buckle with a click and was about to hit the gas, when a shape
crashed straight through the windows and landed in the street.

A body.

"Oh frack," she breathed, when she saw Oliver lying unconscious on the concrete, and the looming
shape of Danny Brickwell coming to finish the job.

Brick was big — and by that she meant choke-on-your-words *huge.* He looked like the bully from
the old Popeye cartoons — minus the beard — and brushed off his massive hands like he'd been the
one who'd thrown Oliver through the wall.

She really needed to start carrying sedatives around in the car.

"I'm probably going to regret this," she said, double-checking her seatbelt.

It was a stupid idea — what she was about to do. But by the time her brain caught up, she'd already
reacted instinctively to the sight of Brick about to finish Oliver off. Her foot slammed onto the gas
pedal and the van surged towards Brick with a deafening screech.

Brick was no Isabel Rochev.

By that — she wasn't referring to the Mirakuru Isabel had in her system. No, she was referring to the fact that Brick had the foresight to use a gun instead of a pair of killer swords. Which he did.

The bullets smashed through the windshield and forced her to swerve. One moment, Brick was stark white from the oncoming headlights — the next — she was hitting the side of the building head-on, with enough force to crash straight through the tin doors. With a sickening lurch, Felicity felt the wheels leave the concrete and there was a brief, sickening moment of weightlessness — right before the collision.

Glass shattered — tires shrieked — and Felicity hit her head hard, setting off a burst of white lights inside her skull, lights that gradually faded to a groggy, edgeless dark.

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*You honor the dead by fighting, and you are not — done — fighting.*

Felicity.

Oliver snapped back to reality at the shriek of oncoming tires and hauled himself to his feet, ignoring the slow ebb of the remaining Vertigo in his system — still trying to cloud his senses. Brick was firing into the yawning mouth where the doors used to be, one of his arms hanging limp by his side like it was broken.

Brick turned back at the sound of Oliver drawing his bow, and spat a mouthful of blood onto the concrete, smirking.

"Looks like you need a stronger dose," he said, tauntingly, and reached towards his pocket.

Except Oliver had already fired, a shot that pierced straight through his wrist and sent the unused Vertigo flying into the darkness.

Brick snarled, a clenched fist tearing the arrow straight out of his arm, ignoring the gout of blood running down his hand. "Still don't like your chances," he said, and raised his gun.

Oliver shot the gun out of his grip and lunged, sweeping Brick's legs out from under him. He blocked Brick's blind swing and twisted his arm behind his back. He'd faced worse than Brick, stronger and smarter, and the only reason Brick could still stand was because he'd used Oliver's fears against him.

Even after everything, Oliver's worst enemy had always been himself.

"Not anymore," he said, through gritted teeth, and dislocated Brick's wrist.

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Brick was passed out cold on the ground by the time Oliver fired a jettisoning arrow to make sure he stayed there. His earpiece had to be reset before he could hear Diggle on the other line.

"Diggle," he said, "are you all right?"

Diggle made a noise between laughing and exasperation. "You're insane — I thought Brick hit you with Vertigo."
"I faced my fears," Oliver answered, smiling in spite of the pain around his ribs.

"I'll pretend I know what that means. Sit tight, we're a couple minutes out from your location."

Oliver had started walking towards the overturned van — he'd assumed Diggle had been driving it.

"Wait — what?" he said, stopping in his tracks. "Where are you?"

"I was with Laurel."

"So Roy was in the van?"

"No — he was getting the last alderman."

Oliver stared at the van with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "John — where's Felicity?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it, not exactly the Tatsu/Maseo reunion (ho ho I might have upped the violence factor)

Songs for this chapter (fun, fun, fun):

Arrival of the Birds - Cinematic Orchestra
Felicity flinched at the explosion of warped metal and the bone-snapping sound of glass exploding all around her. She felt the shards beneath her fingers, digging into her palms. The smell of smoke. A pain in her head.

Voices in her ear — the comms, still running.

Blood running down the side of her face.

An indistinct shape prying the crumpled door loose, a pair of hands cupping her face. She knew those hands.

Dreaming — she had to be dreaming.

Because there was no way that he'd remember her.

"Miss Smoak?" said a voice too cheery for a police officer. "Can you hear me? Miss Smoak?"

Felicity came to — sluggish and unwilling — but conscious in the loosest sense of the word. Instead of finding the police officer about to arrest her for dangerous driving, she saw a smiling nurse in scrubs.

Hospital.

_Crap._

Instincts kicked in — instincts that told her (rather unhealthily) that hospitals were bad, but underground makeshift ORs were _great_, just great — and she tried to sit up, but immediately regretted it from the way her vision swam. Like everything in front of her was jello taken out of the fridge too soon.

"Whoa," she said, gripping the edges of the bed for support. The right side of her face felt tender and stretched. Gingerly, her hand came up to feel her face — there was something weird about it — _ow_. No wonder she could barely open her right eye.

"You have a bit of bruising on your face," the nurse agreed (helpfully). "And a minor concussion. That was quite a spill. Do you remember what happened?"

"Not really," she muttered, giving her head a gentle prod. Ouch. "But I'm guessing the Glades had something to do with it."

"The man who brought you in said that he found you in a car wreck, yes."

Diggle. Maybe Roy.

"Is he still —?"

"I'm not sure — sorry — we've had a busy night around here, and I must have lost track of him. He didn't leave a name — do you remember who he was?"
"No." Felicity sagged a little, back against the pillows. Oh. "Aren't you supposed to let head injury patients sleep?"

"If I wanted them to never wake up, yes," she said, smiling like she'd made a joke. "Hospital protocol means I'm supposed to wake you up every few hours to make sure you're all right."

"Sounds exhausting," Felicity muttered.

"A doctor will be with you shortly — we just have to confirm discharge procedures — then you'll be free to go in the morning."

Felicity tried to match the nurse’s smile — it felt like there was a clothes hanger jammed into her mouth — and lost it as soon as the nurse left. Whoever left her here — three guesses, Diggle, Roy or Ray — had made sure she got a room all to herself. Fancy, but no flowers. Good, she had a tendency to knock flower vases over. She groped around the bedside table for a remote, almost falling out of bed from her profound lack of balance, especially with a minor concussion.

Channel 52 showed the police bringing Brick and his men out of the Glades — interspersed with grateful (and shaky) speeches by the kidnapped aldermen, back with their families — the Mayor doing her PR spin on the near-collapse of the Glades. Speculation flying around about the new vigilante in the Glades, some guy who could blow through a door with his hands. Huh. At least Ray was making a decent first impression. Felicity lowered the remote and smiled when Captain Lance took the stage to thank the Arrow and his partners.

So they'd done their job.

Good.

A part of her had been a little hurt that there was no one waiting for her to wake up, however selfish and petulant that was. But she knew that they'd already wasted valuable time transferring her to a hospital, when the Glades still needed saving, and she was the one who'd crashed the van in the first place (to save Oliver, but she couldn't exactly put that into the insurance paperwork).

There was a tap on her door. Felicity looked up, startled, even though it was just a guy in a white doctor's coat.

"What's up, doc?" she asked, because she couldn't help herself. Must have been the head injury.

Kudos to the doctor for not turning on his heel and leaving right away. To be fair, he'd probably seen worse — worse than a groggy nerd laughing at her own not-remotely-funny joke.

"My name is Doctor Lamb," he said, in a perfect soothing-I've-got-this way. A-plus on the bedside manner. "How are you feeling?"

Felicity shrugged, still smiling at her own bad joke. "A little tired."

"Mm-hm." He tilted her head back to shine one of those clicky-penlights into her eyes. "That's normal — you have a minor concussion, but nothing serious showed up on the x-rays. We'll keep you here for overnight observation, but you'll be free to go in the morning."

"Super," she said.

"You don't have any broken bones, but if you experience discomfort breathing, let us know. It might mean some cracked ribs. There's some scarring on your back that didn't show up in your medical record," Dr. Lamb flipped a sheet of paper on his clipboard, showing her unintelligible doctor's
writing, "did that happen overseas?"

Felicity made a non-committal noise. "Rock…climbing."

Dr. Lamb's expression stayed passive as he slipped his pen back into the front pocket on his coat. He probably didn't believe her. Damn.

"Is there anyone you want us to call? We noticed that your mother's home address is in —"

"Las Vegas — and please tell me you didn't call my mom."

Dr. Lamb only looked at her. "She's looking forward to your call."

Felicity gave him a look. Considering Donna Smoak's tendency to over-inflate isolated incidents of stress (ha, her first period and that one time she'd broken her arm during fourth period gym) looking forward to was an understatement. Her mom had probably booked her ticket to Starling City already, and Felicity really didn't want her to see what concussion-recovery looked like, i.e. binge-watching Netflix on the couch with some aspirins and ice cream.

But Dr. Lamb was already back to his clipboard checklist. "No listed number for your father —"

"— he's out of the picture —"

"— no medical allergies —"

"— just to needles —"

"— and no emergency contacts in Starling City."

"You shouldn't be driving with a head injury — are you sure there's no one you want us to call? They can come and pick you up tomorrow morning."

Felicity shifted her legs under the blanket, as though she needed the time to steel herself for an answer she already knew. "No," she said, firmly. "There's no one."

Dr. Lamb looked at her, and she couldn't work out whether it was pity or surprise — probably both — but he nodded, crisp and professional in spite of the probable chaos inside the hospital from a very interesting night in the Glades.

"Good night," he said, resting a hand on her shoulder in a reassuring pat. "Try not to move your head too much."

Felicity slumped back against the pillows after he'd gone, settling back in for a long night of sporadic sleep fits and nurses checking to make sure she hadn't gone comatose. She picked up the remote, wishing she had her computer and Netflix account with her. There was a pretty decent backlog of shows she had to get through — kidnappings, murders and complicated relationships that in no way resembled real life.

Are you sure there's no one you want us to call?

No, there's no one.

There really wasn't.

It wasn't self-pity (okay, maybe a little), it was Felicity understanding that her friends were cleaning up the city, and her admitting that she really wanted to be with them. Patching up the cracks was their thing, and with everything about to happen — Ray and his ATOM suit, Team Arrow drifting
further away — she just wished she'd had more time to feel like everything was back to normal.

Before it stopped being that way.

Felicity folded her arms on top of her stomach and watched the news for a long time, until the drowsiness crept up on her and she found that she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore.

Oliver groaned involuntarily when Diggle put pressure on the cut in his side.

"Cracked ribs, I'm guessing," said Diggle, pressing on the edges of the sterile plaster. "I'd tell you to take a break, but given your medical history, I'm guessing that's not an option."

"No," Oliver agreed, curtly. "Felicity is in the hospital and I'm going to check on her, but later we're going to discuss why you didn't tell me."

"You need to specify the what," Diggle answered, wrapping up his bloody knuckles. "I neglect to tell you things from time to time."

Oliver gave him a look. "About Felicity."

Roy paused mid-suture, staring at him with narrowed eyes. Diggle calmly finished wrapping his hand before he took one of the chairs, carefully lifting Felix out of the way. The three of them patching up their injuries in the Foundry — it was just a normal night, and it should have been a normal night. But Oliver still didn't realize how it could have been, for all those months. How he could have sat in the Foundry, night after night, without realizing that the empty chair in front of the monitors should have meant something to him.

"You're angry," Diggle observed. "You're angry that we didn't tell you, and now you're going to go rushing off — injuries and all — without waiting to hear why."

"I'm — not —" Oliver trailed off, realizing that it was pointless trying to lie to Diggle.

In all honesty, Oliver didn't know whether he should have been angry at his friends for lying to him — or distracted that Felicity was lying in a hospital bed at Starling General with a possible head injury — or furious that he could have forgotten her, that he could have forgotten Felicity for six months of his life.

Oliver stepped away from the staircase, and braced his hands against the table, as if it was going to hurt — what came next. "Why didn't you tell me, John?" he asked, quietly.

"She told us not to — and I respected her choice, because it was her choice," Diggle said, flatly. "When she let Maseo take you to the pit, she knew — before any of us did — what would happen and what she was doing, but she made her peace with losing you so that your family and the city could have you back. And you did come back, Oliver."

Oliver stared at Diggle as if he'd never seen him before. Diggle, of all people, letting Felicity walk away from him — was unthinkable. But he'd just opened his mouth when Roy spoke up.

"Would you have listened to us?" he said, fixing Oliver with a steady gaze. "You didn't see how Felicity reacted — after you woke up and looked at her like she was a stranger. Three years, and you didn't know who she was, and there was no way you would have believed us, even if we sat you down and explained everything. We didn't want to believe it either, so we watched you. That first month, we watched everything you said, everything you did. We waited for you to notice — to realize — that something was wrong. But you never did. It was like there'd never been a Felicity
Smoak down in the Foundry, like the pit wiped — *everything*.

*Everything.*

Oliver had to look away from the truth in Roy's expression. He faced the table, his reflection in the steel. Six months of blank space, things he should have known but didn't, because he'd let her slip away, no way of knowing whether the Felicity in his head even existed anymore. His grip tightened as he forced the question out of himself, even though he wasn't sure whether he wanted the answer. "Has she —?"

"Moved on?" Diggle glanced at Roy. "A lot happened in six months, but she came back tonight, didn't she?"

Oliver realized he was being stupid — so stupid. After six months of forgetting her, he at least owed Felicity this. There was no doubt in his mind that the Glades had nearly fallen to pieces tonight because of him, because he should have remembered instead of letting her go. She'd saved his life by distracting Brick, to give him those crucial minutes to recover — and now she was hurt because of him, always because of him. He started to move, taking the Foundry stairs at a run.

He'd made a promise to her, and he was going to keep it, one way or another.

Felicity woke from a dream she couldn't remember. For a moment, she blinked groggily at her surroundings — the scratchy pastel-green blanket, the beeping heart monitor, the muted television in the corner — until she remembered what happened. The sky outside was still dark, the news cycle rehashing the same coverage about the Glades. She must have dozed off, watching the news. Part of her wished she'd stayed asleep long enough for it to be morning, so she could just go. Back to her apartment for a shower, back to work so she could pretend nothing had ever changed, because it really hadn't.

She folded her arms over her stomach and stared up at the ceiling, waiting for the drugs to carry her off again. The noise from the corridor was a gentle murmur, and she listened to it like a child listening to her parents talking outside her door, like their voices would help ease her back into sleep.

Her eyes had just started to feel heavy when she turned her head on the pillow — and froze.

Because there was someone sitting in the chair beside her bed.

Someone she thought she'd never see.

Still dreaming — she had to be. Because there he was, asleep in the chair, his hands in his lap, chin on his chest. His chest rose and fell in the steady breaths of sleep, she remembered counting them when he'd been asleep beside her, holding her close.

Felicity covered her mouth, as if to stop herself from saying his name, from shattering the dream, a beautiful dream, that Oliver was near her again.

Six months.

She thought six months would have erased all the longing for Oliver — that her constant rehashing of her reasons for letting him go would have dulled the sharpness of the pain — that she would be able to look at him and not want so very badly to cry. But all she had to do was look at him for the memories to come rushing back, the scars and calluses on his hands, the way he'd laughed at the things she said and whispered against her lips, the tenderness in his touch — like she was too precious to lose.
But he had — lost her.

"Oliver," she said, quietly, ready to wake from the dream. "Oliver."

She saw him open his eyes at the sound of her voice, immediately, without thought. But still she didn't wake from her dream, not when he looked at her and smiled — in a way that was just for her, not when he came to stand at her bedside, not when he reached for her hand.

Felicity gasped when his skin — hot as a furnace — touched hers, recoiling from his touch even though it was the last thing she wanted to do. But her body's instinctive response was to curl around the hurt, to protect herself from the agonizing fallout of losing him again.

"How are you here?" she asked, her voice fraying with the sound of old heartbreak. You don't know me. "You're not supposed to be here."

Oliver sank to his knees, still holding her hand in both of his. "John told me — everything. I'm sorry," he said, softly. "I am so — sorry — that I left you alone."

Felicity was crying — real, shaking sobs as she tried to process that Oliver knew her again, that after months of distance and resigning herself to the fact that she'd lost him — she hadn't hoped for nothing.

He'd come back to her.

"I promised," he said, as if he could tell what she was thinking. Felicity kept her eyes closed, holding herself very still even while his thumbs brushed away her tears and stroked her face, as if she was still waiting for it all to be a dream.

But there he was. He cupped her face, gently, so gently, and Felicity leaned instinctively into him, her hands coming up to encircle his wrists, like she'd never forgotten what it was like to be touched — kissed — by Oliver Queen. When he whispered her name, she felt the thrill of it in her chest, hearing the sound of her name in a voice she knew, knowing what was about to happen and wanting it to.

When their lips touched, Felicity couldn't breathe. It was like the fragile glass in her core had shattered — the walls of ice she'd thrown up to protect herself from the heartbreak — it was all gone now, and rushing to fill its place was all the love she thought she could rid herself of, all the love she still had for Oliver Queen.

She'd loved him even after she'd lost him, and here was the proof. That even though it would never be simple or easy with them, he would always fight his way back to her — no matter what.

Because Oliver kept his promises.

"I let you go," she whispered, with her forehead pressed to his. They were both breathing hard, but neither of them moved apart — like they couldn't bear to. "I thought you were gone."

"I was," he murmured, with his eyes still closed, as if he was remembering. "When the pit brought me back and took you away from me — I wasn't really alive. I didn't know what I was living for — not as the Arrow and as Oliver Queen. I'm not alive without you, Felicity, I can't be."

"Don't you dare say I should have let you die," she said, fiercely. "Because if there is a chance — a shred of a possibility — that I could bring you back, I will always choose you. And I don't regret it for one second."
Oliver thought carefully about his answer as he smoothed the hair off her face. "I know," he answered. "Which is why I'm never going to put you in that position again."

"Never is a strong word," she said, softly. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

Oliver pulled back, stroking her face as he studied her in silence, as if he was memorizing her all over again. "I think we know I always keep this one," he said, and Felicity felt a smile spread slowly across her face.

Felicity didn't have to ask him to stay. Oliver silently climbed onto the bed, arranging himself around her so they fit together, as easily as puzzle pieces meant to fall into place. She felt his heartbeat against her back, the solid weight of his head resting in the curve between her neck and shoulder, his arm encircling her waist. Oliver didn't say anything — he didn't have to. He pressed a soft kiss into her neck, as if to reassure her that he was still there. Felicity smiled and reached for his hand where it lay open against her side, entwining her fingers with his.

Lying in his arms and listening to the sound of his breathing, Felicity felt herself drift into a dreamless sleep, soothed by the knowledge that Oliver had come home. After everything, he'd come home.

Chapter End Notes

Song for the hospital scene: Sea of Love - Cat Power

Side note: a part of me wanted Oliver and Ray to have a confrontation over Felicity being in the hospital, but it didn't feel right. Wanted the moment to be just for them. (Maybe in another fic?)
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

*Deep breath* Here we go, guys. Last update. Brace yourself. This epilogue is gonna be LONG.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a beautiful day for a wedding.

Well, technically speaking, the two people getting "married" were already married, but they'd neglected the obligatory blowout, and Oliver seemed happy with carrying the Queen family tradition forward.

Oliver — happy.

The thought used to rank pretty high on her list of Things-That-Are-Never-Going-to-Happen, just below her getting a tattoo (getting stabbed a million times with a hot needle? No thanks) and just above a peaceful day in Starling City without the need for a certain vigilante. Two things that weren't true anymore, because Oliver was definitely happy, and today would be a Foundry-free day (because a certain metal-suited man had made sure that they weren't the only vigilantes in Starling, not anymore).

Great excuse to sleep in.

Felicity turned her face back into the pillow, trying to escape the stray bursts of sunlight intruding into the bedroom. They really needed to start developing a system about drawing the curtains, and her first nomination was for Oliver to get up and do it.

Except his side of the bed was empty. Felicity sat up, pushing her hair off her face in confusion. Hotel rooms had a tendency to do that, with all the mirrors and weird bedside lamps that were way too easy to knock over. Oliver was definitively not sleeping in, because the shower was already running.

Imagining the hot shower was giving her goosebumps.

Like someone had activated homing mode, Felicity stumbled her way free of the loose sheets and the trail of clothes from the night before (whoops), and pushed into the warm bathroom.

She could barely make out Oliver's silhouette in the steamed-up glass door (pity). A little tentatively (because who wouldn't, with Perfect Human Specimen just walking around), she left her robe on the floor and climbed in after him. It wasn't the first time, after all.

Oliver was standing beneath the blindingly hot shower, his back to her and his head bent against the downpour of water. The scars on his back were ones she already knew by heart — a mottled burn in the small of his back, a dragon tattoo on his shoulder, claw marks at the back of his neck — but her eyes traced a narrow white scar, just beside his left shoulder blade, almost innocuous compared to the others. Long, vertical and raised, it was the place where he'd been stabbed through the heart. His whole body was a ledger for all the times he'd cheated death, but this scar — this was the one time he
hadn't.

Felicity reached out her hand and followed the mark of the sword with her fingertips. Oliver turned his head to the side, but he didn't say anything. He knew what she was thinking, he'd seen her look thoughtfully at the scar before, knew how often she traced it with her hands — in those quiet moments when she remembered how close she'd come to losing him, and the time she actually did.

But he was here now.

Felicity wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her lips to his shoulder.

"Hey," she said, softly.

Oliver turned slowly in her arms so that they were face to face, his hands locked behind the small of her back. Felicity's chin just rested in the dip of his collarbone, and he kept her close as he traced her scars too. Fewer than his, but he knew what they all meant. She shivered when he drew his open hand across the five parallel cuts in her back, the heat of his palm burning into her hipbone when it finally came to a rest.

Wounds, and scars, and blood, and scabs. A shared secret between two very different lives. Like the stars that helped people find their bearings in the night sky — sometimes she thought they were constellations in the skin — reminders that they always found their way back to each other in the end, whatever happened to them.

Oliver's smile was the same smile she saw across the pillow every night — before she drifted off — the same smile he always had when he turned and saw her walking towards him in the sunlight. It was a quiet, peaceful smile of contentment — meant just for her. And she loved him for it. Felicity closed her eyes as the water poured off them both, standing together under the rain that washed them both clean.

Oliver smoothed the wet hair from her cheeks and bent his head to whisper, over the sound of the water cascading around them —

"I love you."

Oliver heard the small thumps from outside the bathroom where he was getting dressed, the small scuffles and involuntary noises he'd gotten used to from Felicity's morning routine. She got dressed like it was a struggle to maintain her balance and not emerge entangled from her clothes. The thought made him smile as he fastened the buttons on his dress shirt.

Felicity was standing in front of the wall mirror when he stepped out into the room, fastening her earrings while the back of her dress hung open and unnoticed, unzipped low enough for him to see the base of her spine. It was red, as red as the pen she had in her hand when he'd first met her, as red as the roses in his dream — the one of their future together, his last and most vivid dream in the space between worlds.

It was a secret he hadn't told her, but very much wanted to — just not yet. Because he wanted to ask her himself, very soon.

Oliver would have stood in the doorway and watched her for the rest of his life, the wisps of hair that fell into her eyes as she leaned close to the mirror, the way she bit her bottom lip as she stared at her ear, so earnestly focused on the little things. One of the many quiet moments in their lives together.

But he walked up to her and zipped up the back of her dress, his fingertips tracing the delicate ridges
of her spine as he did. Felicity looked up, startled.

"I did it again, didn't I?" she said, groping self-consciously behind her back. "Crap. I'm always the wardrobe malfunction at weddings."

Oliver encircled her in his arms, pressed a kiss into her loose hair — still a little damp from their shower — and watched her reflection blush as she remembered it too. "I don't mind," he murmured.

She snorted. "Of course you don't — you were a ghost at Dig's wedding dinner, and the shameless drunk at the one before that."

Oliver gave her a look. "How did —"

"Thea," she said, primly reaching for her necklace, "and the internet. Like I said, the sorority girls at MIT really liked you and they were not afraid to Myspace it."

Oliver shook his head with a smile, marveling at how flippantly she could dig up the idiotic facets of his past and not be fazed at all.

"So." Felicity turned her head to look at him. "Best man. Are you freaking out?"

"Felicity, the wedding was my idea."

"That's what I told Roy, but he still thinks he can bet against me when I have the unfair advantage," she said, swaying a little in his arms like they were dancing. "He thinks you'll try to fake a crisis in the city and get out of the wedding early. I bet him curly fries that you won't."

"Vice-President of a billion-dollar company," Oliver said, dryly, "and you still bet like a sixth-grader."

"Hey." Felicity's expression was amusingly serious. "You have not seen me fight over the last curly fry."

Oliver smiled at their reflections, standing together under the morning sun. "Hey," he said, very close to her ear. "Today's a good day."

Renewing vows wasn't something most couples did before hitting forty. But to be fair, Diggle and Lyla weren't exactly the typical pairing. Married during a war and divorced during peacetime, reconnected during the battle for the soul of a city and now — they were raising a daughter together.

Felicity held Sara's tiny hand in hers as they watched her parents stand at the front of the church, surrounded by friends and family as they reaffirmed an unconventional love story — a winding road that brought them back together. Eventually.

It should have been impossible to cry when her face already hurt from smiling, but Felicity tilted her head back to look at the ceiling, focusing on the interspersed shafts of sunlight streaming in from the high windows instead of blubbering and being weird.

Lyla looked beautiful in a simple white dress, glowing under the sun as she looked up at Diggle and smiled at his vows. Felicity felt less bad about tearing up when she looked past her two friends and had to bite back a laugh, because Roy looked like he had poked himself in the eye.

But Oliver —

Oliver.
She'd expected to see a flicker of the old Oliver Queen — the one that forced a choice between the vigilante and the man. She'd expected to see longing, maybe wistfulness, when he watched his best friend get married all over again, living the life he couldn't have because of the Arrow.

As if he could sense her gaze, he turned his head and their eyes met across the narrow aisle. Felicity felt the intensity of his bright stare — even more than usual — and the secret behind his smile, as if he knew something that she didn't.

The Oliver who'd forced himself to choose was gone. He was smiling like he couldn't be prouder to be there with them, smiling like there was nothing else he could want.

Felicity felt a flutter of anticipation inside her chest, because in that moment, she could see the road ahead of them in Oliver's eyes, and it made her happier than she could ever say. All she'd ever wanted for Oliver was hope — and now he was.

"You may kiss the bride."

The congregation ahh-ed and clapped as flower petals rained down on the congregation from above, mingling with the sunlight to look like pure white snow. Felicity laughed and hoisted Sara up in her arms so that she could catch the flowers in her fists.

*Hope,* she thought, spinning in a slow circle with flowers in her hair and an unbelievable lightness in her heart.

Hope.

The lights from the wedding marquee bathed the grass with a soft golden glow and stretched their shadows long in the dusk. Oliver straightened up, taking a breath of the cool September air.

"Never thought I'd get a chance to do it again — with everyone present and accounted for," Diggle said, with a sigh. "Then again, I do seem to get a lot of second chances."

Oliver chuckled. "You deserve them," he said. "Can't count the number of times you've saved my life — the number of times you've saved the team."

Diggle just shook his head. "You would have done the same for all of us."

They both listened to the sounds of the band getting started, and the murmur of the wedding party behind them.

"Congratulations, John," he said, turning to look at his friend. "It was a beautiful wedding."

"Is this your second try at the best man speech?" Diggle asked, amused.

"Well, the one I want to give isn't exactly going to make a lot of sense to the average guest — what with the fact that they'd need contextual information about our vigilantism," Oliver answered, dryly. "On that note — a toast."

Diggle laughed when he saw the bottle of Russian vodka — straight from the Foundry — and took the glass Oliver handed him.

"John — you're one of the kindest, and most true-hearted men that I have ever had the privilege to meet. You protect those who need to be protected, always the first to take up arms in defense of the innocent, and are a moral compass to everyone around you. I can't think of anyone more deserving
of happiness, and I'm so glad that you found that with Lyla. You showed me what it means to live a normal life without compromising your sense of honor, how to balance happiness and the work we do for the city." Oliver raised his glass solemnly. "To John Diggle: best friend, husband, and father. May you, Lyla and Sara enjoy a lifetime of health and happiness. Congratulations."

"Prochnost," said Diggle, with a grin. "Am I saying it right?"

Oliver tapped the rim of his glass against Diggle's. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"That," said Felicity, "has got to be one of the weirdest things I've ever seen."

In all fairness, she could have been talking about Quentin Lance dancing — which, up until that point, had been about as likely as him gossiping with Oliver. Good for him — he deserved a date. Unfortunately, the less charitable part of her wished it had been someone else other than the one and only Donna Smoak, fellow guest at Diggle and Lyla's wedding.


"It's not Captain Lance I'm worried about." Felicity swallowed some champagne in the hopes that it would take some of the edge off. "It's the person he's dancing with."

"She seems nice — all cheerful and — blonde —" Barry trailed off and he tilted his head to the side, staring at Donna.

Felicity hadn't had the chance to introduce Barry to her mother, so she waited semi-patiently for him to process the family resemblance with his hyper-fast brain cells.

"Ohhh," he said, nodding in sympathy. "Okay, yeah, I see why that might be an issue."

Felicity pinched the bridge of her nose. "At least she's wearing a dress that isn't see-through. That's progress."

Barry patted her sympathetically on the back. "When my cousin Rudy got married, Joe told everyone how I wet my bed until I was eleven," he said, very helpfully.

"Do you think Oliver will let me take a picture of him with Barry?" said Cisco, bouncing on his toes, on the lookout for object #2 of his fanboy fantasies.

"Oh God," said Caitlin, burying her head in her shawl. In a rare break from prim and proper, she was wearing a dark blue dress with lace sleeves, as pretty as a snowflake. "You're not going to photoshop them into their other suits, are you?"

"Uh — no?"

Feeling slightly better, Felicity laughed at Caitlin's threatening expression and reached for her glass of champagne, except Barry had already drained it. For some reason. Within the span of the last few minutes, he'd seen something that was making him antsy — really antsy.

"Uh, Barry," said Felicity, "you might want to slow down on the cocktails — you know — if you want to be on your feet by dinner. And if you don't want to see your meal in reverse."

"Can't get drunk," he said, reaching for another glass. "And I need to be buzzed if I'm going to dance with Iris. The only other time she's seen me dance is when we went to senior prom together and I
broke someone's nose by accident."

Felicity followed his line of sight and saw Iris talking to Roy and Thea near the stage. Were they requesting songs? Huh. She would not have pegged Roy as the type who knew wedding band songs.

"She's your girlfriend now," said Felicity, reassuringly. "I'm sure she won't mind if you step on her toes two — maybe five — times."

Barry necked another flute of champagne. "At least we're near a church — so you can bury my ashes in consecrated ground after I self-combust with shame."

"Did you break something, Barry?" said Oliver, appearing suddenly near Felicity.

"Hey — I thought you disappeared somewhere," she said, as he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Roy almost claimed those curly fries."

Barry choked on his champagne. "I really don't need to know the creepy words you guys use for the stuff you do behind closed doors," he spluttered.

Oliver — as usual — kept a straight face in response to Barry's unfiltered talk. She'd trained him well. "I'm surprised they didn't card you at the bar — I even gave them your picture."

Felicity was the only one who laughed. "He's kidding. I think."

But Oliver was watching Diggle and Lyla on the dance floor — away in their own little world. His arm on her waist shifted as he turned to look at her. "Time for a dance?"

For a minute, Felicity thought he was talking to someone else. "You don't dance," she said, tearing her eyes away from the bridal couple to give him a weird look.

Oliver only smiled and held out his hand. Felicity took it — without hesitation — and let him lead her onto the dance floor. The band was playing a slow song, something with a tinkly piano and enough doo-wop crooning to make her a little self-conscious.

But Oliver pulled her close to him — never letting go of her hand — and rested the other in the small of her back. All this he did easily, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for them to be dancing together.

Felicity leaned back to see Oliver's face. "You know what you're doing," she said, laughing as they swayed, perfectly in time to the music. "Why didn't you tell anyone you knew how to dance?"

Oliver shrugged. "You're the only person I ever want to dance with," he said, simply. "Always."

Felicity blinked hard, as if the lights above them were all of a sudden blinding to her. "Oliver," she whispered, and it was all she ever had to say.

*If you wanted to leave me and roam, when you got back — I'd just say welcome home,* the singer crooned.

They grew quiet then, a world away from the singing and dancing as the both of them thought back to the times they'd lost the other — how neither of them would — could — let go, even if they tried. Felicity moved closer to Oliver, resting her cheek against his chest as they danced. They were near the edge of the canopy, the grassy meadow at their backs, the sprawl of the night sky above. The air was hazy with a light mist of evening rain, making the soft gold lights seem all the more brilliant.
Stars and constellations.

Felicity felt it again, the incandescent lightness in her heart. It was so many things at once — a far-from-simple buildup of coincidences and fate, choices and destinies, a fair share of missteps…and so many more right ones. All leading to the undeniable fact that she’d found Oliver Queen and fallen in love with him — and after all the scars and heartbreak — there he was, standing in her arms, home again.

Oliver tightened his grip on her hand, as if he didn’t want to let go. Felicity let her head fall back as Oliver kissed her, softly, easily — a kiss that acknowledged all the bittersweetness in their pasts and encompassed all that was yet to come, a kiss that could have gone on forever. Then he pulled her closer still, lowered his head until his lips were near her ear, and she heard him murmur a question — just for her.

Felicity smiled, burying her face in Oliver's neck. "Yes," she whispered.

-FIN-

Chapter End Notes

Notes on the Wedding:

- For the part where they're all watching Diggle and Lyla renew their vows, I listened to Lakehouse by Monsters & Men (I love the last part of the song, always makes me think of a couple meeting each other at the end of an aisle)
- When Oliver and Felicity are dancing, I'd listen to 'Nothing Can Change This Love' by Sam Cooke. It's a really sweet, old-fashioned song which seems to sum up their experiences pretty damn well. (Screw Trollenheim, I'm writing Olicity their own wedding dance)

Final notes: #Phew#

Big, BIG, HUGE thank you to everyone who followed/favorited/checked in on/reviewed/commented on/kudo-ed/liked/reblogged/recced my 3-month-long collection of scribbles. Balancing writing and school sometimes got stressful, but only because I wanted to do as good a job as I possibly could and do the characters justice. I really hope you enjoyed the story and that it helped or amused you in some way, but in all honesty I had a FANTASTIC time writing it.

If there are any questions, go ahead and ask (whether it's about me, the story, deleted scenes, the ideas, prompts etc). Do it on Tumblr or private messaging on FF, I don't really mind either way.

I have a term break coming up again, and funny story — that's when I first started You're His Hope. So who knows? Maybe 3x14 will piss me off so badly that I'll decide to write something else. Maybe the Bratva in-canon-as-possible thing, or just some short stories. But I dunno, my personal preference skews towards long-ass fics. (Maybe I'll start working on some of my own ideas - ha who needs time or sleep) Anyway, if I start a story again, you guys will be the first to know.

Cheers,
ChronicOlicity
UPDATE: Sequel

This is a bit belated but THANK YOU (infinitely) for the positive feedback to You're His Hope. Reviews, recs, follows, likes — all amazing to get and I'm sorry if at times the plot went slow or weirdly loopy. I also hope it helped you with season 3 in some way, and if it didn't, I hope it was at least fun to read.

I apologize if you're one of the readers who are already aware of this, but I'm just going to do a quick shoutout. I have no idea if you've been keeping up with the sequel to You're His Hope, but spoiler alert: it's around 38 chapters and 125,000 words in. If you have time, check out The Legacies We Leave. It's kinda like the season 4 fic to follow this season 3 one, and I've had a blast writing it so far. Can't wait to share.

Cheers,

ChronicOlicity

End Notes

Thanks to the very kind reviewer from FF who pointed me to AO3 :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!