Summary

All-in-all, it's the best kidnapping experience Felicity's had so far by a lot. So, it's kind of an epic surprise when the fallout from it is so, so much worse.

Notes

It was dicey trying to figure out the exact spot in the timeline of the show to shoehorn this story. I eventually settled on this: It should be taken as a divergent-canon for the vast majority of season 3. In short? Felicity and Oliver's date in 3x1 happened (along with the fallout of that), but Oliver hasn't lost QC, Felicity is still his EA, Sara isn't dead and is no longer sleeping with Oliver, Malcolm still has Thea in Corte Maltese and Team Arrow generally between big villains at the moment. For reasons.

Also, thank you to Andacus for being my beta, cheerleader, brainstorm partner and introducing me to Arrow in the first place. Additionally, please note that while I've been writing and posting fanfic for various fandoms for most of my life, this is the first under this pseudonym. I'm retiring my old one. If you take a look at what it is, I'm pretty sure its evident
why.

Thank you to SuperArrowGirl on Twitter for the art!
Chapter 1

“You keep runnin’ that mouth of yours and it’s gonna run you right into trouble. You mark my words, Felicity Meghan Smoak.”

It’d been her gran’s favorite thing to say, growing up. Gran had seemed ancient when Felicity was young, with leathery skin that had seen too much sun and lines etched around her mouth from decades of smoking Virginia Slims. But the years lifted away when her eyes twinkled and she’d looked every inch the Vegas showgirl she’d once been when she continued.

“Least you come by it honestly, baby girl. Try to remember, life’s more fun with a little trouble in it, anyhow,” she’d say with a wink.

This invariably led into an outrageous tale about some supposed escapade with the Rat Pack or the mob or both. Felicity was about 98% sure none of these stories were true and 2% terrified that they were.

But as unbelievable as Gran’s stories got - and they did; Felicity will never in a million years buy that Frank Sinatra is actually her grandfather, sorry Gran - she wasn’t wrong about everything. More often than not, Felicity’s mouth did get her into trouble. With teachers. With boys. With her mom. And, one very memorable time, with a police officer trying to give her a parking ticket. Life being more fun with a little trouble in it, though? That she didn’t quite believe until she met one very broody archer. And then? Well… when it rains, it pours. Gran used to say that, too.

* 

Felicity gets kidnapped on a Friday immediately after work. Her very first thought (after ‘Again??’ and before ‘If I’d known I was going to get kidnapped today, I’d have worn my panda flats. Heels are impossible to run in.’) is ‘Why doesn’t anyone have the decency to kidnap me on a Monday on the way to work?’ Because… seriously, it’s a Friday night and she has plans. Okay, so maybe those plans involve Netflix, her comfiest pyjamas and a tub of Cherry Garcia, but they’re still plans. They count.

It’s been a long week. Team Arrow had put in some serious overtime tracking and taking down a human trafficking ring that had been based in the bad part of the Glades (which is a little bit misleading, because it implies there’s a good part of the Glades. Which there isn’t). Oliver had wanted to go patrolling again tonight, but Diggle had put his foot down and said they’d all earned a night off. Oliver had been going to argue. She knew it. But the sheer exhaustion on her face must have changed his mind because he’d looked at her for a long beat before nodding his head toward Digg sharply in agreement. She’d been a little relieved at the time, but now she wishes he hadn’t. It’ll take longer for them to miss her.

The guy who grabbed her wears a mask - because, of course he does - and it’s almost embarrassing that he managed to kidnap her at all because he’s absolutely terrible at this villain thing. All of his moves seem so hesitant that Felicity thinks its actually a minor miracle that he ever made the decision
to go after her in the first place. He’ll be no challenge for the vigilante at all. Hell, he’d probably barely be a challenge for her if her hands weren’t tied.

“I’m not a villain!” Her captor protests petulantly.

And… oops? How much of that had she said out loud?

“You literally kidnapped me off the street, held a gun to my head, tied me up and dragged me to your lair. In a mask. You’ll understand if that seems a little villainy to me.”

“This isn’t about you!” He insists and… God he sounds as young as Roy. Younger, even. She’s gonna actually feel sorry for him when Oliver gets here.

“Well… I’m spending my Friday night tied up in a warehouse, so it’s at least a little bit about me,” she counters.

His grand plan (which he explains… at length… in true villain fashion) is really about Oliver. Or, more specifically, about the 1% and taking from the rich to give to the poor. Felicity is pretty sure he’s a college freshman who got too involved in his Intro to Social Justice class and watched the Disney version of Robin Hood too many times as a kid.

“I’m not the one percent, you realize?” She asks him. “Like, I’m the 50 percent, but probably not by much. I’m not really sure what you think you’re going to accomplish by taking me.”

“He’ll pay to get you back. Everyone knows you’re sleeping with him,” her captor says offhandedly.

Felicity nearly groans in frustration.

“Right, because how else could a valedictorian from MIT with an IQ in the upper 150s get promoted, right?” She snaps. “Maybe after you finish your Social Justice course you should try taking Women’s Studies. Your patriarchy is showing.”

This genuinely seems to bother her captor (who, she found out during his monologuing, calls himself The Hound. Which… a) is a terrible villain/hero name and b) makes her really, really want to make a Game of Thrones joke).

“If you had any idea how much Oliver Queen gives to this city anonymously, you would totally not be doing this,” she continues.

She means blood and sweat and sleepless nights more than she means money, but it’s still true. And what he does - what they do - makes a bigger difference than money ever could.

She can’t tell him that, though. Obviously. So she switches tactics.

“So what happens next?” She asks.

“I just told you,” he responds agitatedly, switching his gun from one hand to the other and wiping a sweaty palm against his jeans.

“You outlined your mission,” she agrees. “I get it. Robin Hood without the Merry Men but with added extortion and kidnapping. What I don’t get it what happens next. Step one complete. You’ve got me. Now you want to swap me for an absurd amount of money from Oliver, so what’s step
“Ransom video,” he says, but it sounds like it might be a question, like he’s asking her if that’s the right thing to do next and man she can’t get over how young he is. She really hopes Oliver doesn’t put an arrow in this kid. The more he talks the more she thinks he’s dangerous because he’s misguided, not because he’s evil.

“Okay. How are you getting it to him?” She asks.

“I dunno… e-mail?” This time its a full-on question and Felicity - in spite of her situation - can’t help sighing at the kid’s naivety.

“He’s a multi-billionaire with his own Fortune 500 company and an in-house IT department. You’re trying to take him for a boatload of money. Do you honestly think he won’t trace a video back to your IP address? Do you have encryption software at least? Or an untraceable e-mail account? Because TheHound@SCU.edu is gonna be kind of a giveaway,” she tells him.

“So a USB drive, then. I’ll have a courier service deliver it,” he counters, standing up a little straighter.

“That’s less easily traced,” she agrees. “Though you’ll want to make very sure to wipe it down for fingerprints - literal and digital - and use a courier service without security videos. Pay cash and try not to stand out. Where are we filming this thing?”

“Uh… here?” He asks.

“Only if you want him to know we’re on the north side of the Glades Interchange,” she tells him with a wince.

“What?? We’re not…” her captor sputters before his face falls, she can see it in his eyes even with the mask on. “…How did you know?”

“I can hear the ferry to the south and the train to east. Plus I can smell some really amazing curry that just screams North Glades, though admittedly you wouldn’t be able to tell that on a video. Still, Oliver will figure it out,” she tells him.

“So I’ll send a photo of you and you’ll write a note. He’ll know its your handwriting,” the kid replies.

She thinks about that for a minute, like she’s really weighing the pros and cons of his plan, before nodding.

“Yeah. That might be best. No digital signature at all to worry about,” she muses.

“Why are you helping me, Miss Smoak?” The kid wonders aloud.

“Felicity,” she corrects.

“What?” He asks.

“My mom’s Miss Smoak. I don’t have nearly enough makeup or push-up bras to be mistaken for her, so… Felicity,” she clarifies.
“Fine,” he agrees, rolling his eyes. “Why are you helping me, Felicity?”

Felicity does a mental fist pump of victory at that. Little tiny steps towards seeing her as a person instead of a tool to get to Oliver are completely fist-pump-worthy.

“I’m a helpful person,” she replies glibly and without explanation. “How are you asking for the money? Because that’d a lot of tens and twenties and I’m pretty sure the bank won’t cash a check for you.”

This appears to be one part of the plan he’s thought about ahead of time and his answer gives so much more away about himself than he probably thinks it does.

“It’s not for me,” he says. “I told you that. I don’t want Queen money. He’ll donate it to the Glades Memorial Hospital for long-term care and rehabilitation of his mother’s victims. Once that’s done, you’re free to go.”

There’s a very long moment of silence in which the kid in the mask fidgets uncomfortably and Felicity offers up a thin, sad smile.

“You could have just asked him, you know,” she says quietly.

“Please,” the kid says sarcastically as he angrily wipes at his teary eyes. “Like I’d ever get near Oliver Queen. Like he’d ever even talk to me.”

“Maybe not,” she agrees. “But he’ll talk to me.”

“What does that…” the kid starts in confusion.

“Oliver’s not his mother. He spent five years on a deserted island fighting for survival. He knows suffering and he knows pain and I guarantee you he knows the names of all 503 people who died in the Glades that night and the 142 who have permanent injuries from it,” she says, meaning every single word coming out of her mouth. “You want him to donate more money for their care? Fine. Done. All you have to do is let me ask him for it.”

“Why are you helping me?” He asks her again.

“I’m not,” she replies. “I’m helping 142 people who need it. And me. And you. And Oliver, really, because even though I’m not sleeping with him, he’s still going to lose it if he finds out I’ve been kidnapped. Again. He tends to take that personally, which is kind of funny when you think about it because it’s happening to my person.”

“So… I just… let you go and you’ll get him to donate the money? How do I know you’ll actually do that?” He asks warily.

“You don’t,” she answers. “But I think I’ve been pretty truthful with you so far and you’ve got nothing to lose by ending this now.”

He’s tempted. And scared. And hopeful. She can see all that, even with his mask in place. She gets that. Hope can be a terrifying thing. It means you have something to lose. Something that can hurt you. She can’t help but think that Oliver would get that, too.
“Can you… can you make sure the pediatrics wing gets new books? And maybe a mural. Something cheery. Like castles and princesses and knights or something. She’d… they’d like that. The kids.”

Her heart breaks a little for this guy and for the little girl in the pediatrics wing a few blocks away, whoever she might be.

“I’ll make sure they get two dozen tablets loaded up with e-books and that mural will happen even if I have to do it myself,” she promises. “Though, for their sake, I really hope I don’t have to because my art skills are completely nonexistent. It would end up unintentionally abstract. I tried to paint an elephant once when I was in middle school and my mom thought it was a submarine. Traumatic experience. I haven’t gone near watercolors since.”

The kid laughs in disbelief, shaking his head and looking at her incredulously.

“You are something else, Felicity Smoak,” he tells her. “You aren’t at all what I expected.”

“Considering my previous abductions, you aren’t what I expected either,” she counters. “In case you’re wondering, that’s a good thing.”

“I’m pretty sure Queen doesn’t deserve you,” the kid tells her.

She sighs in response.

“Unfortunately for me, he agrees with you,” she says.

It’s more than she should have said to him. Hell, it’s more than she should say aloud, ever. But there’s a weird sort of bonding element to this kidnapping experience and she’s just rolling with it at this point.

“Ah,” he says, a look of understanding flittering through his eyes.

“He’s better than you think he is,” she says a little defensively. ”He’s better than he thinks he is, too.”

“Okay,” he replies, though he doesn’t sound convinced.

“He’ll help the hospital,” she tells him, feeling like she needs to continue to make the case for Oliver being a good guy in the eyes of a guy who held a gun to her head not even an hour ago for some reason she can’t even explain. “He won’t even hesitate. How much were you going to ask him for?”

“I don’t know… $50 million maybe?” he says, looking a little embarrassed for asking for so much.

“That’s… a lot of books,” Felicity blinks at him.

“It’s a lot of medical bills,” he says uneasily. “Not everyone in the Glades has insurance, you know. And with hospital stays and surgeries and the medicines… some of their families just can’t afford it.”

“Okay. Fifty million, then,” she replies. “Do you think maybe I could get untied now? The zip ties are starting to dig into my wrists and it kind of hurts.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he says, stashing the gun in his waistband and moving immediately to cut her loose.
“I have to say this is by far the nicest kidnapping experience I’ve ever had,” she says, rubbing her wrists and turning to face him.

“So what…. what do I do now?” He asks, looking at her like she has the answers.

This time, maybe she does.

“Now? Now you head home,” she says with her serious face. “Toss the mask and the gun in a dumpster on your way. You don’t need those in your life. Tomorrow, you go to the hospital to visit your sister. Those tablets will be there by noon and money might buy those kids some books, but they need more than that. You need to be there to read with them.”

He nods, hard and fast, a new plan cementing in his brain.

“Is that… is that it?” He asks.

“Of course not,” she tells him with a little laugh. “But the rest is up to you. I do really think you should take Women’s Studies, though, because you need it.”

“You aren’t going to tell the cops?” He asks.

“That depends. Are you planning on doing this again?” She asks him.

“No,” he says with a short laugh. “Definitely not.”

“Then I don’t think they need to know,” she replies.

“You are something else,” he tells her, shaking his head. “Thank you. I owe you something fierce. I won’t forget you, Felicity.”

“I should hope not,” she scoffs. “It’s not just any girl who hooks you up with fifty million dollars and declines to report a felony to the police.”

He shakes her hand before he goes, which is really weird, actually, and she tries to figure out how exactly she got from being shoved into a car at gunpoint to shaking hands with a masked teenager and promising him a boatload of Oliver’s cash but even she can’t quite make sense of it.

Words are her superpower, she decides as she watches The Hound leave, and she used them to save herself. This is actually fairly badass if you think about it. Which she does. With pride. For longer than she’ll ever admit to later.

Eventually, she leaves the building, rounds the corner and walks directly into a brick wall. Okay, so it’s less a brick wall and more Oliver’s impressive leather-clad chest, but all things considered, she feels like that’s a fairly easy thing to confuse.

“God you’re dense,” is the first horrible thing that comes out of her mouth as her hands settle awkwardly against his pecs because he grabbed her elbows when they collided and doesn’t seem like he’s about to let go.

“Not dense like clueless,” she clarifies, backtracking. “There are clues. Obviously, about things. You have them. I mean dense like… hard and thick and firm and oh my god why am I even allowed to speak words anymore?”
It’s a moment of magnificent verbal floundering that ranks only slightly beneath the whole “it feels really good having you inside me” debacle on Felicity’s internal ranking of foot-in-mouth disease outbreaks, but Oliver doesn’t even seem to notice. Or, at least, he chooses not to be distracted by it, for which she is insanely grateful.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, voice all dark and rumbly even without the modulator.

His hands move from her elbows to her face as he looks her over for sign of injury and her breath stutters a little in her throat because Oliver is always intense but right now he’s in full-Arrow mode and focused on her and that’s more than a little overwhelming.

“I’m fine,” she promises him breathlessly, though he looks thoroughly unconvinced, probably in part owing to her aforementioned breathlessness.

He’s watching her still like he’s expecting her to suddenly have some gushing wound she’s been hiding from him, but hello, she’s not that girl. Of the two of them, he’s way more likely to hide an injury. But then her sense of self-preservation has always trumped his.

“I’m fine. I swear on Fletch, Oliver, really,” she assures him, her hands progressing up to his shoulders in what’s meant to be a reassuring move of solidarity but really just amounts to her coping a feel. She’s not sorry.

He stills at her words. At least, she thinks its her words and not her hands. She’s going with him stilling at her words until he says differently.

“Fletch?” He questions, finally apparently actually paying attention to her words.

“Yeah, Fletch,” she replies, his eyes searching hers for further explanation. “Our lovely electronic baby back at the lair.”

The look he gives her seems to say he’s rethinking the idea of checking her for head wounds.

“The computer, Oliver,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“You… named the computer?” He asks, continuing to look at her as if this doesn’t make her any more sane, which is totally unfair.

“Of course,” she says like its obvious. Because it is.

“You named it Fletch?” He asks again.

“Sure. Fletch. Like Fletcher. Like someone who makes arrows and, you know what? That’s not the point. The point is I’m fine,” she reminds him, hands sliding again down the rest against his chest because she can and she’s too smart to waste the opportunity.

“What happened?” He asks, eyes darting around them obviously looking for her one-time captor. “Your abduction was caught on camera at QC. How did you get away? Where is he?”

“I talked him out of it,” she says proudly.

“...I’m sorry, what?” He asks, far less impressed than she feels is warranted.
“Yeah. He’s gone. I convinced him it wasn’t a good idea after all and he let me go. With the power of my words. I’m a master wordsmith,” she tells him. “Which reminds me, I need to borrow about $50 million dollars? Actually, borrow might be too strong a word. Reallocate might be better.”

“This is you being a master wordsmith?” He asks, looking vaguely amused which is startling beneath the shadow of his hood and the barrier of his mask.

“I guess that depends entirely on whether you give it to me, really. Proof is in the pudding. Or, in the dollars, as the case may be. Anyhow, it’s for a good cause. Promise,” she tells him.

“Felicity, I’d do anything to keep you safe, but we can’t just start paying off kidnappers. That sets a terrible precedent and it puts you in more danger,” he tells her, the thumb of his right hand stroking almost absently against the edge of her jaw.

“Oh, it’s not for him. Not really. It’s for the Glades Memorial Hospital. Great cause. Charitable contribution and everything. You might even be able to write it off on your taxes,” she says proudly because clearly this is an excellent selling point.

“He needs to be caught and punished, Felicity,” Oliver tells her solemnly, “not rewarded with a huge donation to his favorite charity, even if it is a worthy one.”

She gets where he’s coming from. She does. In theory she might even agree. But she talked to this kid, heard the fear and uncertainty in his voice and she knows in the roots of her soul that this isn’t some burgeoning hardened criminal. This is just a kid trying to save his sister.

“He’s not a bad guy, Oliver,” she tells him, voice equally weighty to his. “He’s just scared and desperate to save someone he loves. I thought you of all people would understand that.”

Oliver’s thumb abruptly stops stroking her jaw. He stops moving entirely, really. He’s just… frozen, watching her with this pained expression that makes her breath catch and her heart beat in her throat.

“…Because you have a sister, too,” she mumbles lamely, fidgeting a little under his gaze.

His thumb starts moving against her skin again after a beat, but none of the depth of his gaze fades away and she’s suddenly incredibly keenly aware of exactly how close they’re standing to each other.

“Oliver?” She asks quietly, flexing her fingers against his chest.

He’s always been more a man of action than a man of words and that’s no different now. Instead of speaking, his tongue darts out to wet his lips and slowly, cautiously, he leans down to kiss her.

It’s like gravity, this moment. The pull between them is ever-present lately and his lips on hers are just science in action, really. She loves science.

One of his hands drifts back to cup the back of her head and the other slides down to brace against the small of her back. Hers slide back up his chest to rest against the sides of his face, under his hood, her fingers skirting the edge of his mask. It’s a long, slow kiss, rife with feeling and soul-shattering in its intensity and she wants to live in this moment.

But moments end. Even ones like this that make her skin buzz and her heart thud wildly and her
head spin. And, like science says, for every action there’s an equal and opposite reaction. Stupid science. She hates science.

Oliver pulls back, but not as far as she’d expected. Instead, he rests his forehead against hers, noses touching, breaths mingling in the early evening air and he tucks some loose strands of hair behind her ear. His fingers start stroking at that back edge of her jaw again and she wants to melt against him.

“I thought you said we couldn’t do this?” She asks, regretting speaking even as the words are leaving her mouth.

His sigh is answer enough, really, but he gives her words too this time.

“We can’t,” he tells her, regret tingling his voice.

“Maybe… we could continue not doing this in exactly this manner for the next five, ten minutes or so?” She suggests.

He actually chuckles at her words and a wide smile spreads across his face. It knocks her for a loop. Smiles on Oliver are rare enough as it is, but on the Hood they’re positively foreign.

She can’t not kiss that smile. Really, it would be unreasonable to expect her to try.

She raises up on her toes and presses her lips against Oliver’s smile like maybe she can seal it in place. She knows better, really. She’s crazy about him. She wants him. She wants them. But there’s no one but Oliver who can make Oliver see that it’s okay to want more for himself than his mission.

“I lied,” she says when she finally sets back on her heels. “I need more than fifty million dollars.”

“Fifty-one million?” He asks, still looking at her fondly and slightly amused but with a little more distance than before.

“Nah, just fifty million and a ride back to the lair?” She asks. “Gotta check on Fletch. He needs me.”

“Done,” he says.

“See?” She asks. “Master wordsmith.”

“Are you sure you want to declare that? Because, fair warning, I will remind you of this moment,” he tells her.

“Good,” she says, smiling, fingers tangling with his because he’s adorable and she can’t not touch him. “You’d better.”

They head back on his bike, darting through the streets like… well, like an arrow, really. And it would have gone down as a relatively forgettable, if expensive, kidnapping experience had it not been for the unseen ornithologist with a really, really great camera who’d happened to be set up on the rooftop across the street from the warehouse where Felicity walked smack into Oliver.

Yeah. That kind of changes things entirely.
This fandom is amazing and I'm blown away by the response to this fic. Thank you all so much for the hits, kudos, bookmarks and comments. I'm flattered and excited by the response.

Also... I apparently failed when I posted the first chapter and didn't put that this was a chaptered story. Oops? It is. I have no clue how many chapters, sorry, but there will be quite a few. My general rule is that I'll post the next chapter when I have at least half of the following chapter written. Hence... this is getting posted earlier than expected (yay productivity!). My goal is generally 4-5k per chapter. In case anyone is wondering, there will be some chapters that focus more on Oliver than Felicity (there are a few conversations I need him to have that she can't be a part of) so there will be some from his perspective. This, however, is not one of them... Enjoy!

It’s not that Felicity has never woken up to the sounds of her computers’ alarms going off the morning after being kidnapped. Clearly, this is her life and that is a thing that happens in it. No, the part that surprises her, as she stumbles out of bed a mere five hours after she crawled into it, is that the alarms are blaring on a Saturday morning just past dawn.

Criminal activity happens all the time. Welcome to Starling City. But, statistically - and let’s be real here, Felicity has totally run the numbers because she is that girl - Saturday mornings are a lull. It’s a break between the chaos that is weekend evenings. Typically, she can count on sleeping far later than is socially acceptable on Saturdays, only shedding her Scooby Doo pyjamas sometime after a lunch made out of vice-filled sugary breakfast cereal to trek back to the lair for the evening.

Considering how many days during the week she foregoes sleep in favor of shutting down drug lords and exposing corrupt businessmen and politicians, she actually really needs to crash for an absurdly long time at least once a week.

Just, apparently this week, that isn’t going to happen.

Felicity is graceless and mostly lacking wakefulness as she trips across her room toward her computer which is pinging with alerts at a rather alarming rate. It’s only after the thing stops, which takes her three tries because her sleep-deprived brain is only bordering on functional, that she realizes her phone is buzzing incessantly, too.

“For the love of Linux, shut up,” she growls at the thing, punching the ignore button more vigorously than needed.

She’ll check the messages. She will. Barely awake or not, the sheer number of alerts are worrying, even if they are just the sound of her systems picking up on news stories with key words she’d told them to scan for. It’s probably actually something that needs attention, but it’s not like her facial recognition programs have just located a nest of supervillains or something, so it can probably wait.
Perspective. She has it. Coffee, however, she does not. And… frankly? If her Saturday is starting now, she’s going to need like a vat of it. Immediately.

Her taste in coffee is too good for a Keurig but her patience is too thin for espresso, so Felicity’s coffee maker is a top-of-the-line programmable drip machine that she has never once failed to have prepped for brewing the night before. This is earlier than the thing was set to brew on a Saturday though, so the elegant programming she’d admired when she’d splurged on the machine is overwritten by manually pressing the start button. Felicity folds her fingers together on the countertop and rests her chin on her hands while she tiredly waits for the first blessed drops of liquid energy to drip into the pot.

The decadently rich aroma of coffee that is absolutely not Starbucks or anything found at the grocery store and miraculously shows up next to her coffee maker whenever Oliver comes by fills the air after a few moments and Felicity wastes no time filling her favorite Star Wars mug to the brim.

The smell alone is enough to make her feel more alert and she sighs a little in satisfaction at the first sip. So… she loves her probably-ridiculously-expensive coffee a little too much, is what we’re saying. That this is probably precisely why Oliver keeps buying her more of it goes without saying (or thinking about, if you’re Felicity, which she is and therefore actively does not contemplate).

She’s fortified and relaxed enough by the time the first half of the mug is downed that the buzzing of her cell phone no longer feels like an annoyance rather than a curiosity and, after refilling her mug, she’s ready to make her way back to her computer to investigate. Or, rather, she thinks she’s fortified and relaxed enough to face the buzzing and what it means, but retrospectively she’ll realize she was not. She was very, very not. There is no ready.

She moves the mouse on her computer as she goes to sit but freezes comically mid-action as her screen lights up and the reason for the noisy alerts becomes horrifyingly readily apparent. News about the Arrow (the Hood, the Vigilante… whatever the media is predisposed to calling him any given week) isn’t what you might call rare, but 217 news alerts is an unheard of number. Still, that’s not what has her stock-still with one knee on her desk chair and her coffee mug halfway to her mouth with clenched white-knuckled fingers.

No. It’s the headlines.

The Woman Behind The Man Behind The Mask, proclaims MSNBC.

“Oh holy hell,” she breathes out because the picture beneath the headline finishes loading and right there in front of her is her face, clear as day, with her fingers disappearing under Oliver’s hood as he kisses her.

“This…. isn’t happening,” she whispers to herself, clicking through the next few articles.

It is, unfortunately, much of the same. From the Starling City Gazette to the Today Show to the National Enquirer, everyone is running the story. Picture after picture of a damningly intimate moment between her and the Arrow scroll by and it all leaves her feeling equal parts terrified, angry and violated. This wasn’t theirs. They don’t have a right to that moment. And oh my God what the hell does this mean for her life?

The only blessing in all of this - if it can be seen like that and, while Felicity is generally a glass-half-full kind of girl, that’s proving a challenge today - is that no one seems to have identified her as the woman in the photos yet. But, it doesn’t take a tech genius to see that they will. The photos are
absurdly good quality and her face isn’t obscured at all in most of the shots. Still… that might buy
them some time to figure out how to approach this. Because, right now? Right now she’s got
absolutely zilch for ideas on how they come back from this.

There’s a knock on her door and she’s absurdly grateful for it because if she scrolls past one more
article headline she just might start hyperventilating. Apparently she’s Mrs. Hood or Maid Marian or
(in one instance) the “Peta to his Katniss” and, excepting that last one, she’s been reduced to a bland,
two-dimensional love interest character faster than you can say ‘stereotypical gender roles’ and she’d
sorta like to pass out and wake up in an alternate universe where the last twelve hours of her life
didn’t happen.

Except the kissing. That part was excellent. As long as we’re dictating what she would and would
not like to have happened, let’s be clear on her alternate-reality-of-choice still including Oliver’s lips.

She remains awake and in this reality, though, and there’s a soft knock at her door again, so she
forces herself to move away from the computer to answer her door, wondering on a scale of one to
watching-American-Pie-with-your-mom, how awkward seeing Oliver is going to be this morning.
(The movie was way less about wholesomeness and desserts than she’d been lead to believe, okay?
She doesn’t want to talk about it).

The only excuse she has for what happens next is that she’s completely off her game today.
Understandably. But, well, that doesn’t mean she won’t get a lecture from Oliver and Digg about not
checking her peephole before opening her front door. And the reason that lecture will happen later?
Yeah, that’s because in spite of her assumption that the patient knock at her door is her boys, it’s
totally not.

Instead of Digg’s raised eyebrows and Oliver’s inscrutable expression greeting her when she opens
the door, Felicity is faced with bright white flashes and a cacophony of noise that takes a moment to
make sense.

“How do you know The Hood? Where did you meet? Is he here right now?”

“Who is he? What drives his mission?”

“How does your family feel about you sleeping with a murderer, Ms. Smoak?”

It’s the last one that jars her into action and she slams the door again with the gaggle of reporters
firmly on the other side. Is gaggle the right word? It might not be quite right. Flock? Herd? She’s not
sure.

What the hell?

Was that actually just real?

They’re still shouting questions through the door and, burying any sense of better judgement, Felicity
opens the door briefly again to convince herself that - yes, yes, this is actually happening in her life
right now. The reporters stir into action again, like fish in an aquarium scrambling toward freshly
sprinkled food, and she can’t slam the door fast enough.

It’s only seconds later that her computer starts going insane with alarms again. Because of course it
is. This is the internet age and media is all about getting information out the fastest, so of course the
pictures they took of her thirty seconds ago are already on the Starling City Gazette website.
She catches her own reflection in the mirror and starts laughing. She’s still gripping her mug, one featuring Darth Vader in profile with the words “Who’s your daddy?” written in blocky font, her once-neat ponytail is frizzled and loose and very, very lopsided. And, to make matters worse, she’s wearing Captain Planet pyjamas. And, oh God, she can see the snarky forum comments now. She’s a breath and a half away from being a one-line joke on Reddit, if she’s not there already.

She can’t even stand to look in the direction of her pinging computer, which is a first and makes her resent this whole situation so, so much more. So, she does the only thing in the world that makes sense right now. She grabs her phone and dials.

“Felicity?” a voice answers after two rings. “What’s up?”

“Digg?” she asks, hating how weak her voice sounds and how close to tears she is but God this is so overwhelming and Digg is solid ground and she didn’t realize how much she needed that until she heard his voice.

“What’s wrong?” He asks, urgency painting his voice.

“I… there’s not really a great way to answer that, actually,” she responds with a wet laugh.

“Are you hurt? Where are you?” He asks, and she can hear the shuffle of clothes and she knows he’ll be out the door and at her side as fast as humanly possible, but as much as she wants that she doesn’t know that that’s the best plan.

“No, no. I’m fine. Stop putting on pants,” she says before wincing because apparently even on the most surreal, awkward morning of her life she’s going to make horrible unintentionally sexual comments. “Or put them on if you want. They’re your clothes. You can wear them if you want. Or be naked. I don’t care. That’s not a thing I care about when I’m not there. Though, if I were there I’d totally prefer you to be wearing the pants because I love you, Digg, but not like that and I’m just gonna let the words keep flowing out of my mouth until you tell me to stop this morning because I don’t really think I have it in me to be self-correcting today-”

“Felicity. Breathe,” he orders.

She does.

“Better?” He asks.

She nods for a moment before she realizes he can’t see her and so she’s basically just not responding.

“No, yeah. I’m good. Thanks,” she says with a sigh.

“Good. Now what’s going on?” He asks seriously.

“Turn on the news,” she says.

“Okay…” he says slowly.

“Just… do it,” she sighs. “Any channel.”

“Felicity, why am I seeing you with a truly amazing case of bedhead on my TV right now?” He
“Keep watching,” she responds, biting at her lime-green nails in a way she hasn’t done since middle school.

It only takes a second before she hears him suck in a breath and she knows whatever news station he picked has transitioned from deconstructing what her fashion-sense in nightwear means to the meat of their story.

“I screwed up, Digg,” she chokes out after a long moment of silence. “I screwed everything up. What do we do? I don’t know what to do.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he tells her with reassuring certainty she’s almost sure he doesn’t feel. “Don’t go anywhere. I’m gonna get Oliver and we will be right over.”

“No!” She protests immediately with something like panic in her voice. “No, Digg, you can’t. I can’t be linked to The Arrow one night and have Oliver Queen and his bodyguard push their way through a murder of reporters the next morning!”

“A murder?” He questions.

“Yeah. Like crows. I thought about it. It’s way more appropriate than a gaggle or a flock. They have beady eyes and it always feels like they’re stalking you because they are. So, yes, a murder, but the point is you can’t come,” she tells him.

“Felicity,” he says with incredible amounts of patience. “It’s not the press I’m worried about. You’ve been linked to the Arrow. That makes you a target to every two-bit thug and wannabe villain from here to Coast City. I’m not willing to compromise your safety and Oliver won’t be either.”

She sits at that, a little blindly, barely managing not to spill the remnants of her coffee and she leans against the wall for support, curling her legs under her against the wood floor.

“That thought had… not yet occurred to me,” she admits, focusing on breathing which is a weird thing to have to pay attention to. “But I’m not willing to compromise The Arrow’s identity because I couldn’t keep my lips to myself. What we do is too important for that.”

“You think he’d be functional if anything happened to you because of this? Come on, you know him better than that,” Diggle points out.

“I’m not saying leave me as a sitting duck,” she tells him. “I don’t even like ducks. Just, you know, find some way to keep me breathing and out of the press without unmasking anyone. And bring about world peace while you’re at it because that’s just as likely now that I’m saying this all out loud.”

“How about we focus on dealing with the more pressing issues first and work on the world peace plan of yours a little later?” Diggle suggests calmly,

“Well I suppose it’s good to prioritize,” she responds dryly.

“Felicity,” Digg says with a sigh. “I’m not gonna lie to you. This isn’t gonna be easy and it’ll get worse before it gets better. But, we’ll deal with it. We’ll figure it out just like we’ve figured out every other crisis we’ve hit. I promise.”
“This isn’t like any other crisis we’ve had, John,” she points out with a hollow little laugh. “And once the cat’s out of the bag, even if you manage to get it back in you’re gonna be scratched to all hell in the process.”

“That’s…” John starts, sounding like he doesn’t know how he wants to finish his statement.

“Sorry. Something my grandmother says. Oh God, my grandmother, my mom. They’re gonna see the pictures. Oh, my day just got so much worse,” she groans.

“Reporters are camped out at your door, you’re all over the internet in your pyjamas, criminals are suddenly gunning for you specifically and your day is worse because your mom and grandmother are going to judge you for some PG-rated pictures of you kissing?” Diggle asks, some combination of amused and exasperation shading his tone.

“My grandmother will be thrilled to an unbearable degree,” Felicity says, dropping her head to her hands. “I need a TARDIS, John. Can you get me one? Maybe Lyla can help. A.R.G.U.S. would have a TARDIS, right?”

“I don’t even know what that is,” John tells her.

“Blasphemy,” she mumbles.

“Look, I need to get moving. We don’t want Oliver finding this out from the media before I get there. There’s no telling what he’d do,” Digg says plainly.

She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t a little anxious about how Oliver was going to react to all of this. Last night she’d been sure that they would go forward like nothing had happened. But today their very repressed feelings were very much on display and there were consequences to be dealt with.

“Tell him if he apologizes for kissing me I’ll do a tell-all interview with Barbara Walters criticizing the Arrow’s kissing skills,” she tells him. “Not that it would be true. Obviously. His kissing is fantastic. Ten out of ten. Makes my brain short-circuit and my toes tingle. Ugh, but that’s not something you need to know. Just… he doesn’t get to apologize for kissing me, okay? Make sure he gets that memo.”

“I thought you said it was you that couldn’t keep your lips to yourself?” Digg says, his voice smiling.

“Takes two to tango,” she says, thudding her head back against the wall.

“How about I remind you both of that at regular intervals for the near future?” Digg suggests. “Like the next time you tell me you screwed up. If you don’t want him making apologizes for what happened, maybe you shouldn’t either.”

“Fair enough,” she admits with a sigh.

She’s been ignoring the intermittent knocks of the media at her door for quite a while now. It’s been surprisingly easy to do. She’s sort of gotten used to it, the muffled din of voices and the repetitive raps on her door. So, the sudden absence of them is jarring.

“Digg?” She says in a nervous voice scarcely above a whisper. “It’s super quiet all of the sudden.
They’re not shouting questions at my door. There’s no knocking.”

“Find a weapon and hide,” he orders with no preamble. “I’m on my way.”

“You think there’s-” she starts, her eyes going wide as she scrambles to her feet.

“I think there’s very few reasons the media would stop asking you questions right now and it’s better safe than sorry,” he says reasonably.

A hard knock, different from the impatient rapping of before, echoes on her door and she jumps, grabbing the nearest thing she can find to use as a weapon.

“Felicity Smoak, this is the Starling City Police Department. We need you to open up. We have some questions for you.”

It’s Captain Lance’s voice and Felicity is relieved for a long moment because this fully explains the media’s sudden quiet, but then she realizes there’s a whole different set of problems that she has yet to even consider.

“Digg, it’s the police. It’s Lance,” she says into the phone currently cradled between her ear and her shoulder. “So I’m just gonna put down this… weapon and answer the door.”

The ‘weapon’ is less a lethal tool of self-defense and more a four-inch stiletto she’d failed to put away the night before, but she’s not going to tell Digg that. If he asks, she’ll say her weapon is totally killer. Because it is. Just not in the way he’d mean for it to be.

“Good,” says Digg.

“Really?” Felicity questions with disbelief. “Good? Because I’m pretty sure I’m about to be dragged down to the police station and grilled about my love life like a teenager sneaking in the house the morning after prom.”

“You’d rather some hitmen had just taken out the press and were about to beat down your door to kill you? Because that was sort of where my head was at,” John responds.

“Yeah, no. On second thought, I’ll take the inappropriate questions that are none of their business,” Felicity gulps.

“You feel free to remind them of that,” Diggle tells her.

“That I prefer their questions to assassination?”

“That it’s none of their damn business.”

“Right.”

“Ms. Smoak, this is the SCPD. Open your door.”

“I’d better go, Digg,” she sighs.

“You’ll be fine. We aren’t going to let anything happen to you, Felicity. We’ll handle this,” he tells her firmly.
“Yeah. Let me know when you get Lyla to hand over that TARDIS,” she responds.

“I’ll be in touch,” he says and she can practically hear him shaking his head at her as the line clicks and he disconnects the call.

She sighs and thuds her head against the wall behind her, her phone on the floor next to her on one side and a now-cold mug of coffee on the other. It’s tempting to just stay here. Surely the police will leave eventually if they don’t have a warrant or probable cause to enter. The media might take longer to disperse, but… her fridge is well-stocked and there’s plenty on Netflix to entertain her, right?

Tempting…

But no.

Felicity has never been one to hide from her problems and she’s not going to start now, daunting as they may be this time.

She picks herself up and dusts herself off. Literally. It’s apparently been too long since she did things like clean her baseboards but honestly when her priorities include things like preventing mass murder and thwarting drug trafficking rings, the importance of household chores drops dramatically. Still… if the press might be plastering another picture of her in her pyjamas across the internet, she’d prefer not to have dust all over her butt.

Besides, Captain Planet deserves better than that.

With a sigh, she squares her shoulders, holds her head high, walks over to her front door and pulls it open. Captain Lance is standing there, fist raised to knock again on the door, and he actually looks a little startled that she’s answered. The press, she realizes quickly, is nowhere to be seen. There are at least two other officers down the hall though and she winces a little internally at the idea that the SCPD apparently thinks she’s someone they need to have backup to bring in for questioning.

“Ms. Smoak, good morning,” he greets her.

“Not so far,” she replies. “And right now I don’t really see it getting any better.”

There’s a sympathetic grimace on his face at her words but there’s also annoyance and something that may or may not be judgement.

“You know I’ve gotta bring you down for a few questions, right?” He asks, having the grace to actually look a little ashamed about it.

“Is kissing a crime now?” She questions. “How does that work, exactly? Misdemeanor for closed lips and a felony for tongue?”

“Aw, come on. Don’t make this harder than it’s gotta be,” he tells her, wincing.

“I’m not really sure I’ve got a reason to make it easier,” she rebuts, folding her arms across her chest defensively.

“Cause it’ll be over faster? This is too high profile. Questions have gotta be asked. Our mutual friend know this is going on yet?” He asks.
She glances back at her cell phone sitting silently on the floor next to her coffee mug.

“**Nope,**” she says. “**Definitely not.**”

“**So he’s… he’s not here then?**” Lance asks warily.

“**Is the Starling City Police Department seriously asking if I have the Arrow in my bed right now? That’s really a thing I’m being asked?**” Felicity grits out, because god there’s a mental image she doesn’t mind but doesn’t want to have while talking to Captain Lance, thanks.

“No, SCPD isn’t asking; *I am,*” Lance clarifies, which does nothing to smooth over Felicity’s readily apparent annoyance.

“I’m on your side, Ms. Smoak. You know that,” Lance tells her, his voice dipping in volume a bit. “But if he’s here, there ain’t no way he’s gettin’ out without bein’ spotted and none of us need that. So, take a deep breath, try to remember I’m in your corner on this one and answer the damned awkward question that I don’t actually want to know the answer to. Please.”

“He’s not here,” Felicity relents, feeling a little bit of tension seep out of her at Lance’s words. “It’s not like that, anyhow.”

She’s not lying.

Maybe.

God, they’re gonna ask her questions she doesn’t even know the answer to, aren’t they? She’s about to be grilled *by the police* about an ill-defined relationship that she doesn’t actually understand and *oh my god* the level of ridiculousness that embodies this morning is absolutely off the charts.

“**Good,**” Lance replies, oblivious to her internal moment of hysteria (which is a nice change of pace, really, because generally her mouth starts talking before her brain is even done thinking). “**That’s one thing going right this morning, anyhow.**”

“What happened to the media?” She asks, because she doesn’t want to debate if the Arrow not being in her bed is a thing that’s going *right* this morning or not.

“Pushed ‘em back to the street, but I’m sure they’re still out there. Not a whole lot we can do ‘bout that,” he tells her.

“Well, you can at least give me a minute to get dressed before dragging me down to the station,” she says. “I’d prefer to avoid a skit on SNL about me two-timing the Hood with Captain Planet, if we could avoid that, please.”

“Sure thing, kid. Be ready in five, k?” Lance asks her.

She likes Captain Lance. She does. But she takes ten minutes to get ready. Because she can. And really? Any control she can exert over her own life today seems like a good choice. Regardless of that moment of defiance, soon enough she’s being ushered into a police car through a murder of reporters lined up like the world’s worst game of Red Rover ever.

How is it only eight in the morning? She’s exhausted already. But she holds her head high, because
damn it she’s refuses to make it seem like she’s embarrassed or ashamed about kissing the Arrow.

She’s not. Not even a little. She’s proud of the Arrow, of the good they’ve done together, everyone else’s judgement be damned. And maybe, she thinks, maybe that’s something Oliver needs to see.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait until I was halfway done with the next chapter to post this (it's not quite there) but honestly one of my kids is sick again and I'm very bored playing the role of a pillow for my sick daughter and I figured if I posted this now, I might get some reviews to entertain me. So I'm posting now. Because I'm bored. And you guys have been awesome with the reviews so far and I'm super grateful for them. So... enjoy? It'll probably be two weeks before the next update. Probably. I promise it will include Oliver and Felicity interacting again, though!

She’s wearing a bold green dress because it makes a statement. A questionable choice, surely, but if she has to deny her involvement with the Arrow verbally then she’s damned well going to declare it in other ways.

“You’re gonna drive the press crazy wearin’ that thing, you know? His color,” Captain Lance told her as his police cruiser pulled up in front of the station to find stupid amounts of reporters hanging around with cameras at the ready.

“Probably,” she admits, biting back the urge to point out that the Arrow does not actually have ownership over the color green. “But I’m not wearing it for them.”

“Course not. It’s way more personal than that. I’d have thought you were too smart to get involved with the likes of him,” Lance says in a way that instantly makes Felicity feel defensive.

“Maybe you’re looking at it backwards,” she tells him. “Maybe I’m smart enough to know a good man when I see one and I’m strong enough not to be intimidated by circumstance. Maybe I know that ‘safe’ and ‘easy’ are overrated and unrewarding. Again, I feel the need to underscore the word ‘maybe’ because this is entirely hypothetical. Of course.”

“Of course.”

The gauntlet of reporters to get through between the police car and the station is a little daunting. She’s never dealt with anything like this before. It’s foreign ground to her. But she’s seen it dealt with, hasn’t she? She’d watched Moira Queen walk into a courtroom in shackles and an orange jumpsuit looking every bit as regal as she had hosting a dinner party at the manor. She’d seen Thea breeze through reporters and their invasive questions about drug use and car crashes like they weren’t even there. So, she knows how to handle this.

Like a pro.

Like a Queen.

She’ll be fine. As long as she doesn’t think about the presumptuous implications of her recent train of
thought, anyhow.

“You ready, kid?” Lance asks her, glancing askance at her as he turns off the car. “This is gonna be rough.”

“This?” She scoffs, jerking a thumb toward the media outside the car. “I’ve been held at gunpoint and swordpoint and crossbow-point - or is that bolt-point, technically? Whatever. What I’m saying is that this? This isn’t going to break me.”

And it doesn’t.

Captain Lance had intended to block off the media as much as he could for her, she’s sure of that, but ultimately she exits the car before him, channels her inner Moira and pushes her way through the sea of reporters to the police headquarters with Lance hot on her heels.

It feels like a victory. It feels triumphant.

The effect is somewhat dimmed when she trips over the rug inside the police station and is only saved from a face-full of the cheapest carpet Starling CIty could find by the surprisingly quick reflexes of Captain Lance. But, thankfully, the media doesn’t get that part on camera.

The room they lead her to looks like the interrogation room in every procedural drama ever. There’s a one-way mirror and a shiny metal table with two cheap chairs and absolutely nothing else.

“Cheery place you’ve got here,” she says as she takes a seat. “You could at least add some motivational posters or something. That cat holding on to a rope by its claws that says ‘Hang in there’ maybe. Or is that a mixed message? I suppose you don’t want people in this room to ‘hang in there,’ do you? But you could paint or something. Make it look less like a prison cell.”

“That, also, would defeat part of the purpose, Ms. Smoak,” says a man who follows Lance into the room with an air of superiority. “When I have people in this room, I want them to be reminded of what a cold, dismal place prison would be for them.”

“And you are…?” She asks as the man rounds the table but doesn’t sit.

“Orrin Bryce, Assistant Chief of Police,” he says, dropping a rather thick looking file onto the table before placing his palms on either side of it and staring her down.

If he’s trying to look intimidating - and, let’s be real here; he is - then he’s totally succeeding. He’s older but tall and clean-cut and carries himself in a way that screams ex-military and his focus is wholly unnerving.

“I’d say it was a pleasure to meet you Mister Bryce, but honestly I’d really much prefer my bed right now,” she says before wincing. “To sleep, I mean. Alone. Not with anyone, hooded or otherwise, just for sleeping.”

He blinks, clearly surprised by her mini-ramble but she can see him filtering what she says, categorizing it into little boxes somewhere in his head that somehow lead to him figuring her out. Figuring the Arrow out by extension. She has to remind herself not to panic.

“You know why you’re here, I presume?” He asks, finally sitting and flipping through the file in front of him with false disinterest.
“Oh. Yes, sir. I’ve been lead to believe that kissing has been criminalized,” she tells him.

“Cute,” he says with a sneer that says it really isn’t.

“I thought so,” she shrugs. “Gotta keep a sense of humor, you know? Or, well, maybe you don’t, but I do.”

“Kissing isn’t the problem, Ms. Smoak,” he tells her, pulling a few photos out of the file and tossing them in front of her.

*God*, they’re good shots. She wants to frame them and hang them in the lair. Or use one as wallpaper on her computer. She can’t actually stop herself from reaching out to touch one of the photos, fingers skirting along the edge of Oliver’s hood before Lance coughs behind her and she realizes what she’s doing. She snatches her hand back quickly, but nowhere near quickly enough.

“Funny, that’s all I’m seeing here,” she says, clearing her throat.

“That lunatic in Gotham is photographed kissing someone at least once a month and no one gives a damn. Know why, Ms. Smoak?”

“Because… kissing is legal?” She ventures hopefully.

“Because grateful girls who’ve just been saved by lunatics in masks toss their panties at these guys all the time,” he tells her.

“God I hope you’re recording this because that’s a level of sexism that I’m pretty sure could win me a court case,” she responds.

He ignores her and presses on.

“The problem, Ms. Smoak. Is that these pictures aren’t that. These pictures have your hands on his mask. They reek of intimacy and trust,” he says accusingly.

“Anything but that!” she mock-gasps. “Clearly you’re doing your job as a public servant by thwarting things like intimacy and trust! Starling City is so very much in your debt, Mr. Bryce.”

“How did you meet him?” Bryce demands, ignoring her snark and watching her in a way that makes her squirm.

“Did we miss a step where you tell me I’m entitled to a lawyer?” She sidesteps.

“You aren’t being charged with anything,” he tells her.

The ‘yet’ part of that goes unsaid. For now.

“He saved you from the Count. That’s well documented,” Bryce says, going back to flipping through papers as though he doesn’t have them memorized. Which he does. She’s sure. “Did you know him before that?”

“I’m not entirely sure I can say I know him now,” she gives up.
And… hey. That’s true. At least in the biblical sense. Every other way, she’d say she knows him pretty damn well, but that’s not getting disclosed.

“But you know who he really is,” Bryce says matter-of-factly.

“Can’t say as I’ve ever taken his mask off,” she shrugs.

It’s true, but now that that’s been brought up, it’s totally getting added to her bucket list.

“Do you know how many people he’s killed, Ms. Smoak?” Bryce asks, changing tactics on her.

“Nope. Do you know how many he’s saved?” She counters. “Cause, man, that’s a number I’d be interested in. Gotta say, if we’re weighing my life against the Count’s death, I can totally tell you which one matters more in my book. But, hey, I’ll admit it; I’m biased.”

“Was that when you met him?” Bryce questions.

“What if it was?” she counters with frustration leaking through her voice. “Does that matter?”

“Yes,” Bryce answers.

“Why?” she demands.

“Because if it is, then that means you aren’t the one running his computer systems,” Bryce says.

“…what?” She asks, sounding smaller and more cautious than she’d like.

“There’s ample evidence that the Hood has at least one partner. You have the technical know-how to fill at least part of that role and you’ve managed to link yourself to him pretty definitively,” Bryce says, sitting back with a look of satisfaction.

“I thought you said I wasn’t being charged with anything?” Felicity asks warily.

“You’re not. Yet,” Bryce tells her.

“But you’re building a case. You think I’m his accomplice,” she insists.

“We’re… exploring the possibility,” he allows.

“Well, luckily for you, given the newfound interest in my life by the media, I’m pretty sure you’re going to have a very easy time of keeping tabs on me, anyhow,” she grits out.

“Tell me about Oliver Queen,” Bryce says out of the blue and Felicity is pretty sure her eyes bug out at the statement.

“He’s… my boss. Who the media also document with alarming frequency. I really think I should have a lawyer. Should I have a lawyer? I feel like this is a point where I get legal representation and they tell me to stop talking.”

“It is,” says Laurel Lance breezing into the room like she owns it.

Felicity has literally never been so happy to see Laurel in her entire life. Captain Lance seems like he
feels much the same way, if the breath of relief that breezes through his lips is any indication. Bryce, however, clearly doesn’t share the sentiment.

“You shouldn’t be here. You’re with the District Attorney’s office,” Bryce points out with great amounts of annoyance.

“And therefore obviously a qualified lawyer,” Laurel smiles fakely. “And Ms. Smoak is a friend. So I’m here to offer her my guidance and legal expertise.”

Laurel might be stretching the definition of the word ‘friend’ but Felicity is very much not complaining about that at the moment.

“It’s a conflict of interest,” Bryce argues.

“How about you leave the legalities to me and you worry about dragging a woman down to the station for questioning about who she kisses, okay?” Laurel asks. “Because, Major Bryce, you’re on some seriously shaky ground here.”

“You want to talk about shaky ground? How about the fact that the daughter of the police captain who brought this woman in for questioning is the lawyer defending her?” Bryce challenges.

“I’m sorry. Are you questioning my work ethic right now? Or are you questioning my father’s?” Laurel asks with dry annoyance, her head tilted to the side as she folds her arms and levels a glare at Bryce.

“There’s something very fishy about this,” Bryce says, shaking his finger at Laurel. “And I will figure out what. How is it that you two even know each other?”

“That’s irrelevant. And not your business,” Laurel tells him. “I’m taking my client for now. If you have any further questions for her, you’ll have to run it by me first. And if you have a problem with my ethics, take it up with the Bar.”

“Don’t leave town, Ms. Smoak. This isn’t over,” Bryce warns.

“Looks like it is for now,” Felicity tells him with a shrug before standing and moving to Laurel’s side.

“We need somewhere to talk,” Laurel says to her father, who nods.

“I’ll give you the room,” Bryce says, standing with his file in hand.

“Somewhere without a one-way mirror and microphones everywhere?” Laurel asks, raising a perfectly manicured eyebrow.

“You can use my office,” Captain Lance says.

Bryce protests and Lance says something back to him, his tone short and clipped but Felicity isn’t paying much attention to them at this point. On the list of things preoccupying her mind this morning, Orrin Bryce’s objections to her sitting in Captain Lance’s office doesn’t even rank noticing. Laurel - Oliver’s Laurel - coming to her rescue, though. Well, that’s vaulted near the top of the list.

“Did you come down here on your own or did-” Felicity starts, glancing sideways at Laurel.
“Not yet,” Laurel replies tersely.

“Right…” Felicity breathes, taking note of all of the eyes on them as they walk through the police department.

It’s vaguely reminiscent of the first week at QC after Oliver promoted her to his executive assistant. She can feel the gazes on her, judging her, watching her every move. It’s disconcerting, but she knows how to deal with it by now. How to ignore it with her head held high. And, honestly? Screw them. They can judge all they want. They don’t know Oliver or why he does what he does or what a good man he really is. They don’t know that she loves both him and their mission in nearly equal measure. And even if they did, if they wanted to pass judgement on her for that, it would say more about them than it would about her.

Laurel enters her father’s office first, Felicity trailing on her heels but they aren’t alone in the room. There’s one very blonde, leather-clad woman sitting in Lance’s chair with her feet propped up on the desk and her hands folded behind her head, looking oddly like she fully belongs there.

Then again, maybe that shouldn’t be so surprising. Sara Lance is better at adapting to her circumstances than anyone else Felicity has ever met.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Sara says by way of greeting, far too much joy coloring her voice given the circumstances. “You’ve had an exciting morning.”

“I had an exciting night. I’ve had a miserable morning,” she corrects automatically before blushing fiercely because God that sounds so much worse than it did in her head.

The Lance sisters are both familiar with her brain-to-mouth-filter malfunction by now though, so Sara just laughs and Laurel shakes her head with none of Sara’s amusement on her face.

“God you’re just adorable,” Sara pronounces, swinging her boots off of her dad’s desk and landing them on the floor with a solid thud. “Isn’t she adorable? No wonder he likes her so much. Who wouldn’t fall head-over-heels for her?”

“Get the door,” Laurel instructs Felicity briskly instead of answering.

She does, but only because she’s closer to it than either of the Lance sisters and she definitely owes Laurel one at this point, but if Laurel Lance thinks she’s going to let herself be pushed around, she’s very wrong. That doesn’t mean that she doesn’t owe Laurel one hell of a thank you right now, though.

“I appreciate your help back there, Laurel,” Felicity tells her after the door clicks shut. “Thank you for coming to my rescue.”

“We all need a little help sometimes,” Laurel responds, somehow sounding simultaneously gracious and condescending in a way that is almost certainly unintentional. “And besides, I have a very fundamental problem with the idea of anyone being treated the way you have been this morning because of who they choose to kiss.”

“Absolutely,” Sara chimes in wholeheartedly.

“I hate to think about suing the department because, honestly, they need all of the funding they can
get, but if this gets bad enough I can think of a few cases with enough precedent that we might want to consider it,” Laurel says.

“Yeah, um, that sounds a lot like a newsworthy story and while I’m a little outraged at the treatment of me right now, I’d really like to avoid more situations that end up with my face plastered across the fronts of newspapers please,” Felicity says.

“I’ll just rattle some cages for now,” Laurel says, waving the concern off loftily. “A few quiet threats won’t grab the media’s attention and it might be enough to get the cops to rethink their position. But that’s behind the scenes stuff and you don’t need to worry about that right now.”

“You have enough on your plate,” Sara agrees with a solid nod.

The strangeness of her situation hits Felicity all of the sudden. Which… okay, that’s happened a few times today if we’re being honest, but this is strange on a whole new level. A very personal level. Somehow she’s ended up in a room with just the Lance sisters with everyone having full knowledge of this fledgling, repressed thing between her and Oliver and the awkwardness hits her full on.

She knows she’s one of the most important people in Oliver’s life. She has zero doubt of that. He relies on her and he likes her and he has feelings for her and despite what emotions they may or may not be acting on, she knows she means a tremendous amount to him. But so does Laurel. So does Sara. Not in the same way, probably, but there it is. Somehow, the three most important women in Oliver’s life that he’s not related to have ended up in this room dealing with the very uncomfortable fallout of his very muted love life.

“Did he ask you to come?” Felicity finds herself asking Laurel.

“He wanted to barge in in full Arrow mode and grab you himself,” Sara answers with a sharp laugh.

Felicity feels a flush work its way up her cheeks as something warms inside her chest at that idea. Its a ridiculous, foolhardy idea, but a girl can be flattered by it anyhow, okay? Totally flattering.

“Thank you for talking him out of that plan,” she says to Sara.

“Thank Digg,” Sara responds with a short laugh. “He bodily held Ollie back while we came up with Plan B.”

“Once we talked him down, he wanted to send in all of QC’s lawyers. Convincing him to scale it back to just me wasn’t exactly easy,” Laurel tells her.

“That would have been… a lot of lawyers,” Felicity blinks, imagining the entire legal department filing into the police station.

“It would practically be a giant sign proclaiming he’s the Arrow, too,” Sara points out.

“This is a house of cards and its very close to falling down,” Laurel says seriously. “The leap from you and the Arrow being involved to Oliver being the Arrow is a short one. And once that connection is made, the rest of us fall with Ollie. No one would believe that Sara or I didn’t know what was going on. There’s no possible way Diggle couldn’t know. Identifying Roy wouldn’t be hard and considering his relationship history with Thea, people would think she was in on it, too. Probably my father would take the fall even though he genuinely doesn’t know who the Arrow is. We would all be going to jail for a very long time.”
Felicity gulps.

“Yeah, um, prison doesn’t fit well with my five-year-plan. Not that I have an actual five-year-plan, but if I did, that wouldn’t be on it. Should I have a five-year-plan? Is that a thing people actually do? Do you have one?” Felicity asks.

“I think I’m pretty fair evidence that five-year-plans are pointless,” Sara smirks.

And… yeah. Okay, fair point. Sara Lance’s life has been anything but predictable.

“So do we have a plan to avoid prison? Because I know orange is the new black and all and, frankly, I can rock that color like no one’s business, but I really don’t know how to make a shank out of a bar of soap or anything and my computer skills would probably be less than helpful in the big house,” Felicity rambles.

“It’s a shiv,” Sara corrects.

“What?” Felicity blinks.

“Shank is a verb. Shiv is the weapon. And you can’t make one out of a bar of soap. At least, not effectively,” Sara tells her.

“See? This is why I can’t go to prison. I don’t even know these things,” she says before realizing how judgemental that sounds. “Not that I’m implying you should go to prison because you do know those things, but I’m pretty sure you’d fair way better than me. You’re all assassiny and everything.”

“Don’t worry. If we go to prison, I’ll look out for you. You can hold onto my pocket and everything,” Sara winks with a toothy grin.

“I… what does that even mean?” Felicity asks bewildered while Laurel rolls her eyes.

“You’ll just flirt with anyone, won’t you?” Laurel asks Sara in astonishment.

“That was flirting?” Felicity questions.

“No wonder you and Oliver can’t get your act together,” Sara sighs. “It’s like the blind leading the blind.”

“Sara,” Laurel barks.


“Can we get back to the part where we need to find a way to stay out of prison? And also breathing? Because I like breathing and there’s like a lot of people who’d love to see the Arrow taken out,” Felicity says because even though the topic is uncomfortable, it’s both necessary and less uncomfortable than discussing her relationship with Oliver with the Lance sisters.

“We’re… working on a plan,” Laurel allows.

“That’s less than comforting,” Felicity points out.
“Yeah, I’m not much for empty reassurances, in case you hadn’t noticed,” Laurel tells her bluntly.

“That had, in fact, not escaped my notice,” Felicity responds, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

“For now, we’re dealing with the immediate,” Sara tells her. “That means extraction. You’ve got half of the press corp out there just waiting for you to walk back out and we need to ditch them.”

“Right,” Felicity agrees, brow furrowing. “So how do we do that?”


“Meaning…” Felicity starts, her voice trailing off.

“Meaning Laurel made a big show of coming to your defense. Everyone is expecting you to leave with her and no one noticed me coming in,” Sara explains.

“And you’re both blondes,” Laurel extrapolates.

“You want us to switch places?” Felicity asks warily.

“Swap jackets and hand over your hair tie and we’re set,” Laurel confirms. “Sara’s got dark sunglasses. They’ll figure out its not you fairly quickly, but the initial attention on us should be enough for you to slip out the back and head over to QC on your own.”

As plans go, it’s simple but better than her total lack of a plan, so Felicity nods and shrugs out of her long gray coat, handing it over to Sara.

“We’re all meeting back at QC?” She asks, tugging the hair tie out of her hair.

“Yes. The lair and your apartment are completely out of the question, obviously, but there’s nothing inherently suspicious about both you and Oliver being at work, even on a weekend, and we have a great deal of control over security there. I think we’re all going to be spending a lot of time there in the near future,” Sara tells her as she hands Felicity her leather jacket.

Felicity winces at that. She loves the lair. She loves her computer set-up and the sense of security and the salmon ladder and Oliver on the salmon ladder. But she can’t lead the media or the police back there without endangering the team and it makes her feel helpless in a way that nothing else about this ordeal has so far. She hates it.

“QC it is, then,” she agrees, more glumly than usual.

“Hey. This will all fade away soon, okay? We’ll deal with it,” Sara tells her reassuringly, bright eyes boring into her as she lays a hand on her shoulder.

Felicity nods, a little bit of hope seeping back in because its really hard not to believe Sara.

“Yeah. Okay,” she says. “But no one had better mess with my computers while I’m gone.”

“We wouldn’t dare,” Sara smiles, pulling her hair back into a high haphazard ponytail as she talks.

They don’t look alike by any means. Sara’s muscle definition puts Felicity’s to shame, Felicity’s face
is longer, more angular, and Sara’s cleft chin is something of a dead giveaway. But, at first glance they’re passable as each other. They’re about the same height, same age, same hair color. It could work. It will work. Because it has to.

“You’ll have my bike and you won’t have to push through the media, so you’ll get there well before us. QC security is tight. There shouldn’t be any reporters by the time you get into the parking garage. We’ll all meet back up in Ollie’s office,” Sara tells her. “Just drive straight there. No stops. You’ll be out in the open on your own for a short window. We don’t like it, but it’s necessary. If you aren’t on QC’s security camera feed within fifteen minutes of leaving here, no force in the world is going to keep Oliver in his office instead of out looking for you and I don’t think I have to tell you what that could mean for all of us.”

“Yeah… No, I’ve got it,” Felicity says, biting her lip as she nods and picks up Sara’s helmet.

“Can I ask you something?” Laurel questions suddenly

“Shoot,” Felicity responds, which is pretty funny in her head because arrows.

“Forget about the rest of us for a moment and what it could mean if we get discovered. Just for you… was it worth it?” Laurel questions. “I mean, Ollie’s a great kisser. No doubt. And obviously there’s something between the two of you. But all of this - the media, the police, the intrusion on your life - was it really worth it?”

“Living life on my own terms is always worth it. So, yes,” Felicity says immediately.

“Still… it was just a kiss.”

It could never be just a kiss with her and Oliver. There was always going to be more to it than that. But Laurel doesn’t need to hear that so Felicity doesn’t say it.

“It’s not about the kiss. Although I don’t regret that either. It’s about not letting other people tell me who I should be and what I should want. So, yes, it was worth it. Because it was honest and no matter what the fallout is, I want to live my life on my own terms,” she responds.

Laurel studies her like she’s seeing her for the first time. And, in some ways, maybe she is. Felicity knows she’s overlooked a lot. She’s the assistant, the sidekick, the tech support. And that’s okay. She’s secure enough in who she is that she doesn’t need to be noticed by people like Laurel. She doesn’t need their acknowledgement of her worth.

“I think I underestimated you, Felicity,” Laurel says after a moment.

“That’s okay. I get that a lot,” Felicity smiles back before pulling Sara’s bike helmet over her head. “Now let’s go pull a fast one on some reporters, shall we? It just might be the highlight of my day.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

So, I feel the need to point out (because it really starts this chapter, though its more obvious next chapter) that the tone of this story will shift some when Oliver's in the scene. He's a broody guy and it's a difficult situation they find themselves in, so you'll find when he's around the narrative will be a little less light, a little less funny. That's intentional. Don't worry, there's plenty more to come that's more Felicity-centric with her unique brand of charm and lightness (or my interpretation of it). Also, on another note, one reviewer asked if kids still play Red Rover, since it was mentioned in chapter two. I didn't know, but said I'd ask my kids. I'm sad to report apparently it's no longer allowed in schools, at least in my area. I'm kinda bummed by that. Lastly, we're looking at about two weeks before I expect the next chapter to be posted. My schedule is a little busier this weekend and next than it had been. Thanks for reading!

Laurel and Sara's plan goes surprisingly smoothly. Felicity can hear the press swarming the Lance sisters outside, but Sara had the foresight to park her bike near the emergency exit and Felicity escapes out the back with no reporters the wiser. Still, she doesn't really relax until she's pulled into QC's parking garage eleven minutes later because you never know what's going to happen on the streets of Starling City.

People can manufacture earthquakes in the most genocidal gentrification plan ever. Ninja assassins can drop in formation around you. Billionaires with masked alter egos can kiss you and get busted by a bird watcher with a camera.

You know… everyday stuff.

Today, though, karma appears to realize it owes her one. Or one billion. She's not sure of the number exactly but she's definitely going to start tallying soon because karma owes her something fierce at this point and she's keen for it to start paying up.

She'd first noticed QC's increased security when she was approaching the building, as a few reporters were corralled across the street with guards blocking the building's main doors. But it's even more obvious once she actually gets into the building and steps foot in the elevator to find a security guard ready to check ID before allowing passage.

His name is Bruce. He looks oddly alert considering how bored he must be since its Saturday and, other than Team Arrow, there's probably like eight overachievers and the cleaning staff on site. But she's grateful for Bruce. She's not about to besmirch a reporter-free, assassin-free zone so she just smiles and shows him her badge before heading up to see Oliver.

To see Oliver…

Yeah, there's a sudden realization. This morning has been one long chain reaction with no time to think and she's scarcely had a moment to consider what Oliver's stance on all of this might be. Luckily, the elevator ride is a short one so she doesn't get to dwell long because that way lies madness. And probably ice cream. But mostly madness.
She'll have time for thoughts later - time to decompress with a pint of Breyers and make sense of everything and think about feelings and whatever the fallout from all this will be - but this isn't the time for that. She knows it. So she pushes those thoughts to the side, puts them in a little box marked 'Do Not Open Mid-Crisis' and marches forward.

Literally.

She gets off the elevator and strides into the office alone with a sense of purpose and an agenda to deal with the crisis du jour. Of course, she immediately sees his face and that shoots her plan to all hell because he's looking at her with some horrible mixture of relief and longing and guilt and God he just hits her on this primal emotional level without even trying and it stops her in her tracks every single time.

"Hey," she says, awkwardly rooted in place a few feet just inside the doorway to Oliver's reception area.

He's just past the threshold to his office and there's literally a glass wall between them except for the partially open door that he's hesitant to walk through. The symbolism of this is not lost on her.

"Hey. Hi," he replies anxiously, similarly freezing in place and looking like he has no idea what to do with his hands.

It's dead silent for a very, very long moment, which is ridiculous because they have literally never had more things that they need to talk about. But they don't. They just sort of… stare at each other. And in some ways that's a conversation all on its own. His eyes are screaming I'm sorry and I love you and I didn't mean to do this to you and I'll protect you and You should leave me and Please don't leave me and she can't even breathe under the weight of all the things he won't say.

"I'm gonna go… see if I can find a knife to cut all this tension with," Diggle says as he walks out of the room.

There's another awkward silence after Diggle leaves. It's just her and Oliver and an ocean of space between them. And Felicity is left with the sense that there should be crickets chirping or some kind of orchestral score or something because this is cinematic in its epicness and how is it that they manage this level of angst with nothing but 'hey' uttered between them?

"So…" she says finally in an off-handed way. "How was your morning?"

"Felicity," he says with a bit of a wince. "I-"

She cuts him off immediately. She might not know precisely what he's about to say, but she sure as hell knows the tone.

"Don't," she orders with a warning look.

"I just shouldn't have let-"

"Oh my God, Oliver, what part of 'don't' didn't you understand? Did you not get the Barbara Walters memo? Did you think that was a joke? Because it so wasn't. You don't get to brood about this. Or, okay, that's not fair," she corrects. "You can brood if you need to but I'm going to take offense because there's only just so many times a girl can take someone regretting kissing her without it giving her a complex, do you know what I mean?"

"I don't regret kissing you," he says, as serious as she's ever seen him without his hood.
"You don't?" She asks warily, because there's another shoe and it will drop any second now.

"Felicity, I've never regretted kissing you. I regret that I can't keep kissing you."

And there it is. Stupid shoe. She's normally such a shoe-person, too.

"You could, actually," she points out. "I wouldn't object. No objections here."

"I can't be who I-"

"Yeah. I get it," she interrupts, hating that her voice sounds thick and gritty. "It was heart-wrenching enough the first time we had this conversation. I would kind of prefer not to have it again, if it's all the same to you."

"Okay," he agrees quietly after a beat.

And damn it, why does the look he's giving her make her feel like she's just kicked a puppy or something. It's completely unfair. It's not like she's the one doing this to them. She just doesn't want to talk in circles about it and that's frankly completely reasonable, if you ask her.

"No knife, but I did find these two hanging around down in the lobby," says Digg's voice as he re-enters the room.

Felicity turns to see him behind her with the Lance sisters whole and hale. Apparently the Faux-licity plan worked like a charm, then.

Heh. Yeah. Okay. So that's a pun she's really glad she didn't say out loud.

"My fifteen minutes of fame are over. You can have it back now," Sara tells her with a short laugh, pulling off Felicity's coat and holding it out to her.

Felicity unzippers Sara's leather jacket, shrugging it off to swap back with Sara, and she hears Oliver suck in a sharp breath immediately.

Oh. Right... the green dress.

She chances a look back at him. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are still skimming her form, possessiveness and wariness both reflected in his eyes.

"You... shouldn't have worn that," he tells her tightly.

"And you shouldn't dictate her clothing choices," Laurel says, surprising literally everyone in the room.


"Very what?" Oliver asked confused, because it's pointless to make pop culture references to Oliver and expect him to understand them. "That dress is the exact shade of my Arrow gear. It... the press will be all over that. They're going to say it's a declaration of your loyalty to the Hood."

"It is. That was kind of the point. I am loyal to you, to the team. I was pretty sure after this morning you'd need to be reminded of that," Felicity challenges him, crossing her arms and tapping her bubblegum pink nails against her elbow.

It's possible that Oliver's not breathing for the next few moments that follow.
"I feel like a conversation about strategy needs to be happening," Digg says, letting the words just kind of float out there.

"Where's Roy?" Felicity asks, glancing around for the missing member of Team Arrow.

"He's busy," Oliver says, shifting his weight between his feet and avoiding eye contact.

"Oliver…" Felicity says slowly, because she can read him absurdly well. "Tell me Roy isn't currently harassing a rather opportunistic bird watcher."

"No," Oliver says and Felicity breathes a sigh of relief because she'd know if he was lying and he's not. "No, he's probably on his way back by now."

"Oliver!" She protests.

"We need the memory card, Felicity. You know that," Oliver points out. "If there are any pictures he didn't release to the press, we need to make sure they don't show more of my face."

It's a really thin excuse, but there's some merit to it. Just enough that she can't wholeheartedly object, anyhow. But given what the guy did release, she finds it highly unlikely that he's got the perfect shot just sitting in his camera waiting to be exposed later.

"Roy can catch up when he gets here," Sara declares. "For now, lets triage this thing."

"Triage it?" Laurel asks her, with a perfectly manicured eyebrow raised.

"You know, figure out what part is gonna bleed out first and slap a bandaid on it," Sara clarifies, moving across the room and lounging across Felicity's desk chair.

"I think we need more than bandaids," Laurel tells her dryly.

"The most important thing is to protect Oliver's identity," Felicity declares firmly. "That's definitely number one on the triage list."

"I agree," Sara says with a pleased nod.

"Well I don't," Oliver protests, finally stepping a couple of feet forward so he's at least in the same room as all of them. "Felicity's safety comes first. She's in danger and that can't stand. I won't let it."

"Newsflash, Ollie - if your identity gets out, we're all in so much more danger," Sara points out, the severe look on her face totally at odds with her lazy occupation of Felicity's desk chair. "Including Felicity. We have to mitigate that first and foremost."

"She's already at risk. She's going to need protection. From the press, from the police, from every damn criminal with a grudge against the Arrow," Oliver argues.

"She will," Sara replies. "But you can't be the one protecting her. I'm sorry, Ollie. But you being around her right now, either as Oliver Queen or as the Arrow? It just endangers her more."

The words hit Oliver like a suckerpunch and Felicity can't help but cringe because even though Sara has a point, it also plays into so many of Oliver's issues all at once.

"The press will be watching her every move. So will the police, man," Digg pipes up gently. "The Arrow pops up near her, they're gonna swarm. And if Oliver Queen stands a little too close to her, looks a little too friendly, people are gonna start making connections. I know you wanna have her
back on this but we've gotta be careful or everything is gonna blow up in our faces."

"So how do we do this, then?" Felicity asks, clearing her throat. "Where's the end of this, because right now I'm not seeing a plan. I'm seeing a train wreck where I have to avoid everyone I care about and live in fear of my own shadow indefinitely and I refuse to live that way."

The elevator chimes and Roy strides out, joining the rest of the team, his hands sunk deep into his pockets. He raises both eyebrows slightly in vague amusement at he looks at Felicity. So… clearly someone thinks this whole thing is hilarious, anyhow.

"Did you get it?" Oliver asks in place of a greeting because his manners seem to have been displaced by his frustration.

"Sure thing, boss," Roy says, tossing a memory card through the air in Oliver's direction.

Oliver being Oliver, he of course catches it without even really looking and Roy sinks his hands back into his pockets.

"Can we cast doubt on the authenticity of the photos?" Laurel suggests. "Make them look photoshopped?"

"Maybe if we'd gotten to them sooner," Felicity replies. "They've been out there too long. They're all over the internet, the news. It's viral at this point. I am actually trending on twitter."

"As what?" Sara asks curiously.

"Um… #quiver," Felicity mumbles, flushing a little and totally, completely ignoring Oliver's gaze.

"What? Why?" Oliver asks bewildered as Digg curses profusely under his breath and Sara hisses in distaste.

"Cause it's where you stick your arrows," Roy replies immediately.

Felicity tries really, really hard not to look at Oliver because a) she's so red at this point she probably looks like a lobster and b) the tension in the room just grew like exponentially. But she can't help it. She looks. So sue her, okay? She's only human.

Oliver being angry isn't new. She's seen him angry before. It kinda goes hand-in-hand with his mission. But she's never seen him quite like this. He's… livid. His fists are clenched so hard they're white and the color has drained out of his face and the look he's leveling Roy… she's actually a little concerned. But Felicity doesn't take action until Oliver starts striding purposefully in Roy's direction.

"Hey. Hey," she says, stepping directly in his path and holding her hands up in the universal gesture for him to stop. "You don't need to go all growly on Roy. He's not the one you're mad at, okay? Don't kill the messenger."

Her move forces Oliver to look at her, to focus on her, and they're solidly in each other's space for the first time since last night. Underneath the anger and the guilt and everything else that plays on his face is the frustration, plain as day. It's at the root of everything going on with him right now. He feels responsible for this, for all of it, and he can't fix it and that's eating away at him right in front of her.

"Who should I be all… growly at then?" He asks her with biting intensity.

"It's the internet Oliver. There's like, I don't know, a million people commenting and tweeting it.
What do you want, like a list of them all?" She scoffs.

Because this is a ridiculous idea.

Clearly.

"Yes," Oliver says, something solidifying in his gaze. "I think a list is an excellent idea."

"What so you can go put in arrow in all of them?"

"No," he fidgets, eyes darting around the room. "...Possibly."

"Oliver! You can't go shoot people for being mean to me on the internet. It's the internet. Have you met the internet? It's a giant troll colony," she tells him. "They'll snark and be crass and forget about me tomorrow as long as the media does because one of the Kardashians will get pregnant or the new Avengers trailer will come out or no one will agree on what color a dress is. Or maybe the perfect storm will hit and a pregnant Kardashian will be wearing a dress no one can agree on the color of while she watches the new Avengers trailer. I don't know. The point is the internet will get over it and we will too, okay?"

"No. It's not okay," he tells her, his eyes pleading with her to understand where he's coming from. "It's not okay for people to treat you like that. They're bullies and they're wrong. You're so much better than that and it makes me sick that I just have to sit here in my office and pretend that we aren't friends and we aren't partners and let them trash your name for a laugh!"

"You can't save everyone from everything, Oliver," she says softly, her fingertips unconsciously gravitating to brush against his.

"When its the people I care about the most, it seems like I can't save them from anything," he responds, brow furrowed.

Someone coughs - Digg, she suspects - and Felicity startles a little at the reminder that she and Oliver aren't actually the only ones in the room. She backs off a step and Oliver turns away from everyone to look out the window, the thumb and forefinger of his right hand rubbing together. It's distracting in no small part because just a few seconds ago those fingers were brushing against the backs of her knuckles. She blinks and forces herself to look away, back toward the rest of the team. Sara's wiggling her eyebrows but Laurel looks exceedingly uncomfortable and Felicity instantly feels bad about that. There's enough uncertainty in the air already; She doesn't want to add to Laurel's discomfort.

"It's not just on you to keep her safe, Oliver," Digg speaks up. "We're a team for a reason. And there's nothing about this that we're just gonna let stand."

"But none of you can really be seen around me," Felicity points out. "It all leads back to the Arrow, back to the team. I'm all for saving me. Two thumbs up for that. But I also don't want to expose you guys accidentally for my sake."

"We have more allies than just Team Arrow," Roy points out.

Felicity looks at him quizzically.

"I made a call," Sara chimes in, clarifying things.

Oh Great Google, please don't let who she kisses become a matter that requires the involvement of international assassin ninjas.
"You called in the *League of Assassins*?" Oliver asks her bewildered.

"No… I called Nyssa," Sara corrects. "She's… indisposed at the moment but she'll be in town in a few days."

"And until then, I've got Lyla talking to Waller," Digg says, levelling Oliver a look.

Oliver makes a displeased noise and flinches, his jaw still tight, but he says nothing.

"They've got eyes and ears and bodies with no connection to the Arrow and we need that right now, man," Diggle reminds him.

Oliver nods sharply, but still says nothing.

"We're trusting Waller, now?" Felicity asks with great uncertainty, because ARGUS is probably even less trustworthy than the League in her book.

"We're trusting *Lyla*," Diggle corrects.

"Digg, she's like twelve months pregnant at this point," Felicity points out. "Are you sure you want her involved in this?"

"Like I'm gonna tell Lyla to stay home and keep her feet up just because she's pregnant?" Diggle snorts. "No thank you. I don't have a death wish. Even with an off-center sense of balance and swollen ankles, she's still a better shot than I am. She's got your back. We all do."

"What about the media? The police?" Oliver asks.

"Roy and I are on that," Laurel says. "I'm going straight from here to the ACLU headquarters downtown. I have a friend there who can make enough noise within the police bureau to hopefully give them second thoughts about harassing a citizen based solely on who she kisses. And I already have a call in to the National Organization for Women to pursue the women's rights angle. They'll have opinion pieces in the papers tomorrow. Probably the day after, too, when they hear Bryce's ridiculously sexist comment during Felicity's interview today."

Oliver groans horribly at this and drags a hand through his hair before looking at Laurel.

"*Bryce*? Orrin Bryce? He's the one on this?" Oliver asks, like he's really, really hoping there's another 'Bryce' involved.

"Yeah… sorry about that. That's really bad luck," Laurel says with a little one-shoulder shrug.

"Why? Why's that bad luck?" Felicity asks, missing something.

"Remember how before the island, Ollie once peed on a cop?" Sara asks, eyebrows raised pointedly.

"Oh…," says Felicity, because she actually had chosen to forget that rather unflattering fact. "Oh, that is bad luck, isn't it?"

"It really could be. Everyone knows you're Ollie's assistant. If Bryce decides that making your life more difficult makes Ollie's life difficult…" Laurel says, her voice trailing off at the end.

"Yeah," Felicity sighs. "I've got the picture."

"But I really think Bryce will back off after the press starts spinning this differently," Laurel says reassuringly. "And Roy has a plan to help with that, too."
Felicity tries not to let it show exactly how surprised that makes her because it might actually be a little insulting to Roy. But… really… Roy and spinning the press are not two things she would have ever expected to share the same sentence.

"Yeah, see, Sin and I were talking the other day and she says there's like… lots of people who the Arrow's saved who aren't shy about talking up the good he's done," Roy tells them. "She's got a couple friends in different support groups. Assault survivors, recovering drug addicts, stuff like that. They're puttin' the word out in those groups that it might be nice if, since the Hood stood up for them once, if they could do the same thing now for him. They're gonna flood comment boards online, mostly, but at least one said she was gonna do an interview with channel 52."

"That's…" Oliver starts but genuinely seems overwhelmed by that, completely at a loss for words. "Wow."

Felicity can't help but feel a swelling of pride. Oliver does so much good. They do so much good. But sometimes they get so focused on the guys they're taking down that they forget how many people they've truly helped. And Oliver could use to see that. They all could, really.

"It's all hands on deck, man," Digg says softly. "It ain't gonna be easy, but we've got this."

"Yeah," Oliver agrees. "Sounds like you do."

The words themselves might not quite be self-loathing, but the tone sure is and Felicity knows better than to let that stand without being addressed.

"We're a team, Oliver. We all protect each other," she reminds him, placing a hand on his elbow. "Just because you aren't suiting up for this one doesn't mean you're failing us… or me."

"There is… literally nothing I can do, Felicity," he says with a short, humorless laugh. "I did this to you. I did this to us. And I can't fix it. I can't stop the police or the media or even the criminals. Hell, I can't even pay for a protection detail because the media would trace the money right back to me."

Something clicks in her head at that.

"Oh. Crud. Money," she says, glancing at the clock over Oliver's shoulder. "Yeah, um… speaking of money - and don't think we won't come back to your savior-complex another time because we will and also you didn't do this to us, we did this to us; or, if you want to get technical, a nosy bird-watcher did this to us - but, yeah, back to money. I need to borrow your credit card."

"Anything you use it for, the media is going to realize the funds are coming from me," he tells her again. "That's too big a risk right now."

"Yeah, no, this isn't about the crisis of the day. This is about the crisis of yesterday," she says, holding out her hand for his card.

"Yesterday? You mean the day I already gave you fifty million dollars?" He asks, a little amusement finally seeping into his eyes for the first time today.

Roy makes a little choking noise and starts coughing horribly somewhere nearby.

"I asked Ollie for a pony once. For my sixteenth birthday. I got it. I'm starting to wonder if I shouldn't have aimed higher," Sara muses.

"Okay, technically that wasn't actually for me," she points out to Oliver before turning back to the rest of the group. "I didn't even make a big deal about it because it totally wasn't a big deal, but I sort
of got kidnapped yesterday and used the combined superpower of my words and Oliver's money to save myself. I mean, my words are a superpower, not Oliver's money. Oliver doesn't have a superpower. He's superpowerless. Superpower-less not super-powerless because that would be untrue and also kinda mean. There's just a... really important hyphen in there..."

"Remember how I promised to remind you later that you declared yourself a master wordsmith?" Oliver asks her, clearly trying not to laugh.

"Ugh... with great power comes great responsibility and I have failed this dialogue," she groans, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling.

At least its not laughing at her. Unlike every single person in the room.

"So you paid off the kidnapper? That's a really questionable choice, Ollie," Sara says after a moment, the laughter fading from her voice.

"No," Oliver replies. "Felicity talked him into letting her go before I even got there. All she promised in exchange was to talk to me about donating some money to Glades Memorial Hospital. I wasn't going to say no to that."


"So what is it you need the card for today, then?" He asks her.

"Tablets. Two dozen of them," she responds. "Not for me. Even I don't need that many. It's for the kids in the pediatrics wing. I promised them tablets with e-books by noon today. It's already almost ten and I don't want to let them down."

The smile he offers her is small and affectionate, that rare, genuine smile he has that isn't part of a cover or a persona he has to act out. She loves that smile. It makes her heart stutter and her breath catch every time. It's real and raw and unassuming and it reminds her that this, this is Oliver. Not the man in the hood with a bow in his hand or the one in a suit dazzling investors. Or not just those men, anyhow. They're facets of him, but this is, too, even if she rarely gets to see it. This is the part of Oliver that most people don't even know exists but she could get lost in.

"Here," he says, pulling out his wallet and handing her a jet black card.

It's his own, not the company card, which is a fact that's not lost on her even for an instant.

"If I were you, I'd give me something with a credit limit," she jokes, trying to force some levity back into their exchange. "Giving me a limitless credit card and letting me loose in an electronics store is kinda like sending most girls to Tiffany's with your checkbook."

"If you feel the need, you can stop off there on your way, too," he responds with amusement.

Everything starts to feel awkward a moment later though when they both realize precisely how intimate that exchange makes them sound. Felicity is all wide-eyed and slack-jawed and she thinks she probably looks something like a goldfish right now. Not the cute little ones you win at carnivals, but those weird, expensive ones with eyes that look like bubbles. It can't possibly be her best look but she can't help it because Oliver just sort of accidentally offered to buy her jewelry and what even is that? Her brain doesn't know. It's not computing. But it keeps trying to right up until Laurel lets out a short, humorless laugh and drags her mind back into reality where the incredulous look Laurel is giving Oliver feels like it might possibly vaporize her if she gets in the way.

Laurel is maybe a Cylon, is what she's saying.
"I don't care about the money, is what I meant," Oliver clarifies, clearing his throat in an uncharacteristically unsettled moment.

"Spoken like someone who's never not had it," Roy snorts.

"Lyla's downstairs," Digg says, looking up from a text message on his phone. "She'll take you to the store and then the hospital to drop off the tablets. But, do me a favor and keep her out of Tiffany's, will you? It'll make my life a whole lot easier."

"Anything for you, John," Felicity says, smiling widely at her friend.

"Come on. I'll walk you down," he responds.

She nods and smiles a goodbye at the Lance sisters and Roy before looking back toward Oliver. His expression is very much like it was when she first entered the room, all concern and guilt and longing. But it's not quite the same. It's dulled some, now. Like being around her has settled him a little, though clearly not enough. She decides quickly, that's probably giving herself too much credit. The plan has settled him, knowing they aren't just at the mercy of the press and the police and the criminals. That's all.

She falls into step with Digg, who squeezes her shoulder in solidarity as they head down the hall.

"Oh, Ollie..." Sara sighs from somewhere behind her.

Felicity speeds up her pace so she's out of earshot for whatever Sara says next. Frankly, she's got enough on her plate to think about already.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

A/N - Faster post than expected! Thanks for the encouragement, guys. It's been very inspiring. On another note... has anyone else noticed that Arrow is just basically The Princess Bride lately? I mean, Oliver's like on the cusp of being the Dread Pirate Ra's al Ghul and he was mostly-dead all day but Miracle Max and his wife totally brought him back. Pretty sure that means Diggle is Inigo and Deadshot is the Six-Fingered-Man... I might have given this entirely too much thought.

It's debatable if Oliver Queen has ever felt quite so helpless before and considering he survived a capsizing boat only to watch his father shoot himself before washing up on a not-so-deserted island, that's really saying something.

This is different though.

This time its not himself he can't help.

That virtually everyone he knows seems to have a part they can play in protecting Felicity and cleaning up the fallout from his lack of self-control while he has to sit on the sidelines and do nothing makes it so, so much worse. He's frustrated and guilty and confused and terrified and all he wants to do is rewind the clock and go back to when she walked smack into him and called him dense. Not because he wants to change how things went - though he should want that; he knows he should - but because he just wants to feel all of that again. All of that relief and affection and hope and amusement and joy that's so very transient in his life these days and only ever seems to well up when she's around.

He wants those moments to last, but they can't. Life has taught him that lesson over and over and over again, drilled it into him in painful, absolute terms. And he's terrified of learning to expect those moments because then what will he do when they're gone? What will he do when she's gone? Loss is an old companion of his by now and he knows well how much it hurts when it creeps up unexpected. When it takes something you forget isn't really yours.

And make no mistake, Oliver Queen is well aware that the lightness and joy he feels from being around Felicity isn't really his. Standing near her is like feeling warmth from the sun, but that heat and that brightness isn't something he generates for himself. Not anymore. But somedays the illusion feels real.

"Oh, Ollie... Sometimes I wonder if you do this to yourself on purpose," Sara says with piercing eyes, her chin resting on her palm and her elbow resting on her knee as she sits in Felicity's desk chair with her feet planted firmly apart.

He grimaces in her direction but says nothing. He can't remember now if Sara always read him this well or if its just since the island. Regardless, their shared experiences have certainly bred a level of
understanding between them that most people wouldn't be able to approach. Sometimes that's a comfort. Other times - like now - it's damned inconvenient.

"I have to go," Laurel says abruptly, her tone clipped. "I have a tremendous amount to do today. Roy, do you need a ride? I'm cutting through the Glades anyhow."

"Yeah. Thanks. I gotta give Sin a hand with some stuff. Talk to some people," Roy says.

"Laurel," Oliver finds himself saying just to draw her attention.

She looks back at him, eyes fierce and jaw set. She's upset about all of this. He knows she is. Everything between them might be long over and done with but the length and breadth and complexity of their relationship means it won't ever really be over between them. Not entirely. There will always be the ghosts of expectations lingering in the air when they're around each other.

"Thank you," he tells her finally, because it's really the only thing he can follow up with. "I appreciate your help."

"Just don't screw this up, Ollie," she says, jutting her chin out proudly. "That'll be thanks enough."

He's not sure if he means their damage control plan or his pseudo-relationship with Felicity and he's really not inclined to ask, so he just nods with a tight smile as she and Roy stride out of the room.

That just leaves Sara. Sara who is studying him like she does her prey. It's highly unsettling.

"Just say it, Sara," he says agitatedly.

"Say what?" She asks all wide-eyed with faux-innocence.

It's incredibly irritating. He had actually forgotten how irritating she can be when she tries. And she is trying at the moment. He has no doubt of that.

"Whatever it is you're dying to get off your chest. Just get it over with," he demands, frustration clenching at his muscles.

He's always hated waiting for someone else to make the first move. Being reactionary is not in his nature, to say the least.

"Yeah, I'm not having this conversation with you without some kind of weapon in my hand," she decides, standing abruptly. "Meet up at Verdant later? I have the feeling you'll need to spar at some point today, anyhow."

And, man, is that ever true. There's an itch beneath his skin, a demand for action and want for battle, real or pretend. He needs to feel the burn of his muscles pushed to their max and the adrenaline of conflict and the single-minded focus that comes with facing off against an opponent.

She really does know him well. They are far too much alike in many, many ways.

"In a few hours," he tells her. "I have some things I need to do first."

"Oliver," she says with a note of warning in her tone. "Whatever you're thinking of doing, don't."

"The plan is solid. And, I don't have anything better. I'm not going to mess with it," he says reassuringly.

"So you're completely on board with you ignoring the fact that you and Felicity are even friends for
who-knows how long and leaving protecting her up Waller and Nyssa?" Sara asks with a completely appropriate amount of incredulity.

Oliver's jaw is so damned tight that it actually audibly pops when he goes to respond. In a lot of ways, that's sort of a response unto itself.

"I realize that being around her publicly as her friend or as the Arrow is a danger to all of us right now," he agrees under duress.

If she thinks he's going to agree to trusting the League of Assassins and ARGUS with Felicity's protection, though, she's dead wrong. He might not be able to be seen protecting her, but no way in hell is he going to forego keeping a discreet eye on her when people like Amanda Waller and Nyssa al Ghul have her on their radar. They're at least as dangerous as the people they're guarding her from. And, frankly, Oliver can't imagine them playing well together.

"Even as her boss, I've got a few concerns, honestly, Ollie," Sara says, disrupting his train of thought.

"What? Why? We're entirely professional," Oliver says bewildered.

Sara laughs sharp and loud at that.

"Oh god, do you really think that? Oliver, that's… precious," Sara responds with far too much amusement.

"What are you talking about?" Oliver bristles.

"You touch her constantly," Sara points out. "Most of the time I don't think either one of you even realize you're doing it, but you do. And it's cute, really it is. But it's damned inconvenient right now because honestly you two have had enough rumors flying around this place since you promoted her in the first place."

"I do not-" Oliver starts, but Sara cuts him off immediately.

"You do and you linger," she tells him with great gravity, leaving his brow furrowed as he contemplates her words.

"I get it," Sara tells him, her voice gentler than before. "She's possibly the most moral, guileless person I've ever met. That kind of thing pulls people like us in. We live in the gray. We can't afford the luxuries of honesty and goodness. Not like she can. And seeing there are still people like that? Like her? You can't help but be drawn to that. You can't help but try to remember when you were like that, wonder if you were ever like that, because if you were it was so long ago that it's faded from your memory. I get it. But you can't touch her and you can't stare at her like she's the only thing worthy of your attention because you're going to get her arrested or killed."

He wants to argue. He wants to fight her, to hold her at arrow-point and make her take it back. Instead, he doesn't move.

"If you're saying this to me now, I'm a little concerned about what you are refusing to say without a weapon in hand," Oliver says, trying and mostly failing to cover precisely how much her words bother him.

She's right, though. He might not want to admit it, but he knows she's right. About everything. He needs to be more self-aware around Felicity. And those things about her, they do draw him to her like a moth to a flame. But it's more than that, too. It's her loyalty and her charm and her intelligence
and her confidence and every little thing about her that draws him in. But Sara either hasn't picked up on precisely how deeply his feelings run for Felicity or she's choosing not to lay it out in front of him all at once.

He hopes for the former but suspects the latter. Sara's incredibly observant.

"To be totally fair, I much prefer all of my conversations happen with a weapon in hand," she smiles.

And just like that, she forces levity back into the room where she'd previously sapped it out. That at least, he recalls, is a quality she's had about herself since well before the island. She's always been able to shift the atmosphere on a dime, manipulate it to her liking. He can't help but wonder what, if anything, she sees in him that predates the island. Not much, he hopes.

"I've got somewhere I've gotta be," Sara says a moment later. "You good?"

"I'm fine," he replies automatically and Sara hums with heavy appraisal, weighing the truth of it.

"Okay," she finally decides aloud. "I'm out, then. Provided I can find where your girl parked my bike."

It's probably telling that Oliver's reaction has nothing to do with the 'your girl' part of her sentence and is entirely about the bike. And Felicity. Riding it. His brain might be short-circuiting at the mental image.

"She… Your… I'm sorry, what?" He finally sputters in a horribly undignified and completely un-Oliverish way.

Sara, entirely keeping with her character, grins broadly and barks out a short laugh.

"Yeah. You've totally got this under control. No idea what I was worried about," she pronounces, shaking her head as she saunters out the door, leaving him alone.

Once he would have felt the need to follow Sara, to seek out camaraderie and noise, to drown his life in that. He's not that boy anymore, though. Silence sits well with him and being alone is comforting in its familiarity. It gives him space to think, space to breathe, and his mind drifts back to everything Sara said. This is, most definitely, what she had intended. The League taught her far more than just how to use a staff and Sara has always been a quick study.

Maybe she's right, he decides. Maybe he doesn't have this under control. But he needs to. For Felicity's sake, for the whole team's sake. He can't change how he feels about her - isn't sure he'd want to if he could - but he can change how he acts around her. At least in public. If he isn't meant to be her friend or her partner, that really only leaves being her boss. He hates being reduced to that, but the stakes are high and there are no other options on the table. So he'll have to remember that every moment is a battle, every moment demands his whole focus and most deliberate of actions.

He sighs heavily and rests one palm against the huge glass window while digging the fingers of his other hand into the tense muscle at the back of his neck. He doesn't know how he'll do this. But from the birdseye vantage point of his office window, he does know how to start. If all he can be is her boss, the foundation for that needs to be lain and certain rumors need to die a swift death.

The elevator dings and Oliver shifts his gaze, turning his head slightly to see Diggle walk back in, but he doesn't move from his place at the window. He's at home enough with Diggle that he doesn't bother to raise his guard, emotional or otherwise. There are few others that would be true for.

Digg crosses the room to stand at Oliver's side, his arms folding in front of his chest as stares down at
the street below, looking for whatever Oliver has been seeing down there. He doesn't say anything right away and Oliver is once again grateful that other man is as comfortable with silence as he is. They don't need words to be on the same page.

"The plan's a good start," Digg finally says after a few moments.

"It is," Oliver agrees, flexing his fingers as he drops his hand from the back of his neck.

"How are we gonna improve it?" Digg questions, levelling Oliver with a weighty look.

Oliver looks from Digg to the scene below.

"We're gonna take a walk," Oliver announces, straightening his frame, donning his CEO persona like armor. Which it is.

"You sure on that?" Digg asks surprised, a questioning eyebrow raised in Oliver's direction.

"Yeah," Oliver replies, hoping he sounds more confident than he is.

"You're the boss," Diggle says by way of agreement or possibly a reminder.

And he is. That's what he has to be right now.

It's only a few moments before they walk out the front doors to Queen Consolidated, ostensibly walking down the street to a nearby coffee shop. In truth, Oliver's goal is in the other direction. But its far more effective to lure your prey to come to you than to charge towards it. He knew that even before the island, if we're being honest.

It works. Just like he knew it would.

There are only three reporters hanging around out front, probably most of them are camped out in front of Felicity's house or the police station, but those three reporters practically trip over themselves in their haste to get to him as quickly as possible.

"Mr. Queen! Mr. Queen! A moment of your time please?" Asks the first as she closes in on him.

He vaguely recognizes her from one of the local stations. She's obviously fake in that way that television reporters often are. Her hair is too blonde and her smile too white, her chest too big and her skin too tan. There's nothing real about this woman and something in him finds it fitting that she's reporting stories with just as much truth in them as she exudes.

He stops and makes a show of checking his watch.

"I've got five minutes. I'm a busy man with a lot to do today," he tells her wearing his serious face, Digg standing behind him in his typical bodyguard pose, rigid and watchful.

"Thank you!" The reporter breathes, gesturing wildly at her cameraman to start rolling and the other two reporters who moved just a bit slower than her move in.

"Mr. Queen, what is your reaction to this morning's revelations about your assistant, Ms. Smoak's, relationship with the vigilante known as the Arrow?" She asks pushing the microphone in his direction.

"What Ms. Smoak or any of my employees do on their own time doesn't concern me. Her personal life is none of my business," he says levelly, his tone as professional as it has ever been.
"So, is it safe to say that her employment won't be impacted by her association with a known criminal?" Another reporter pipes up.

"Absolutely not," Oliver responds immediately, genuinely concerned at the media's twist on this story. "She's an incredibly valuable asset to Queen Consolidated and she's committed no crime. It would be in violation of both company policy and state employment laws to allow her personal relationships outside the workplace to impact her employment. And, honestly, I would be hard-pressed to find someone both capable of replacing her and willing to put up with me."

He offers up his charming-but-troublesome-billionaire-businessman smile that the press always seems to love. It's as fake as the reporters. As fake as their stories. But it suits his needs right now and Oliver is nothing if not willing to play a role to protect people he cares about.

"Given her sudden rise from IT tech support to your executive assistant with minimal qualifications for the job, there has been widespread speculation about your personal relationship with Ms. Smoak," says the first reporter.

It isn't really a question, but Oliver knows the answer he needs to give anyhow.

"I promoted Ms. Smoak because I trust her and her ability to think ten steps ahead of me and everyone else in the room. In any room. Making her my secretary was probably the smartest move I've made as CEO of the company, in spite of the fact that she wasn't particularly thrilled with the move," Oliver clarifies. "She's too smart for her job and she's too smart to get involved with someone who has a reputation like mine. I'm not really sure what that says about the Hood, though."

"Are you saying you support the Hood, then?" Pushes the third reporter.

"I've never met the guy," Oliver shrugs. "But I will say that Ms. Smoak has proven time and again that she's an excellent judge of character. And, I've never been used for target practice, which I'm understandably happy about. So, I suppose that means I'm reserving judgement for now."

"Do you think Ms. Smoak's influence over the Arrow is the reason you've not been targeted by him?"

"I haven't thought about it. But if it is, I suppose I'm grateful that he has such good counsel at his side. I know I value it," he responds.

"Do you have any concerns about the safety of your employees given that Ms. Smoak's high-profile status as the Arrow's girlfriend is likely to put her in danger?" The third reporter asks.

It takes everything Oliver has in him not to respond to the word 'girlfriend.' It really does.

"I'm always concerned about providing a safe and productive work environment for all of QC's employees. Ms. Smoak is included in that. I've brought my personal head of security, Mr. Diggle, in to assist in strengthening our safety and security protocols," he says, looking pointedly toward one of the cameras. "They will be in place for the foreseeable future. I won't have any of my employees afraid for their safety while working at my company."

It's a warning, plain and clear, to the reporters and the criminal elements who might be planning to come after Felicity. Queen Consolidated is out of bounds. He can do little else to protect Felicity. But he can do this.

"Mr. Queen, there was one point where you were suspected of being the Arrow. Is there any truth to that notion?" Asks one of the reporters, though he really couldn't tell you which one. There's only three but they're all starting to look the same to him at this point.
"In case you hadn't noticed, I already have a full-time job," he laughs lightly.

"That's all for now," says a new voice and Oliver turns to his side to see a plump, short woman in an ill-fitting navy business suit as she approaches them. "You can expect an official statement from Queen Consolidated to be released in the next few hours. Any more questions for Mr. Queen should be run through my office. For now, let's let the man get his coffee and get back to work, shall we?"

The cameramen lower their gear even though the reporters are offering the fakest, most insincere smiles Oliver has ever seen. But then, the head of his public relations department inspires a very similar reaction from him, so he's not judging the reporters on this particular issue.

"I want fifteen minutes with Ms. Smoak," the first reporter says to the newcomer in a way that sounds like a demand.

"And I want to win the lotto and sleep in on Saturdays, Debbie. That's not going to happen, either," the woman laughs.

Oliver has never liked this woman more. Never.

"Come on, Pamela. A ten minute sit-down with her over coffee and I'll get the business section of the Starling City Gazette to run a full spread on your hometown bad boy-turned-businessman with a heart of gold who's dedicated to the well-being and success of his company's employees," the reporter pushes.

"I don't need a fluff piece, Debbie. Earnings are up, our image is good and anyone who doesn't know we've got the best CEO we could ask for isn't paying attention. I'm not going to strongarm an employee into talking about her personal life on camera. I'll ask her if she's interested, but if I were you I wouldn't hold my breath," Pamela advises.

"Except a call," the reporter tells her.

"Oh, I expect a lot of them," Pamela smiles toothily. "Now if you'll excuse us, Mr. Queen and I have an appointment."

She grabs his elbow and tugs it with surprising strength in the direction of the coffee shop, leaving the reporters and their cameramen and their questions behind.

"Pardon me for asking, but have you lost your mind?" She asks as soon as they're out of earshot.

"I was just going to grab a coffee, Pamela," he says innocently.

"Bullshit," Pamela tells him and Digg snorts from a step or two behind them. "You decided to play white knight to your secretary and while I could have spun that as part of your reformed party-boy image if you'd come to me, you didn't. So now I'm left sweeping up this mess because you can't seem to remember that while running the company might be your job, running its image is mine."

"I didn't say anything that-" Oliver starts.

"No," Pamela tells him, shoving a pudgy, manicured finger at his chest. "You don't get it. This is national news. You don't say anything to reporters without running it past me first. You stick to talking points I give you or you stay the hell out of it because while earnings are up and your image is improved, you're still a four-time college dropout whose family has more skeletons in its closet than a coroner's office. Are we clear?"

How she manages to be intimidating, he has no idea. She's five-foot nothing, pushing her mid-forties
with absurdly big hair and not an ounce of muscle to her. But she makes him feel like an elementary schooler who just got dragged into the principal's office.

"Did you talk like this to my father?" He bristles.

"Of course," Pamela says, looking at him like he must be clueless. "Why do you think he hired me? Now get your coffee. You have any meetings today?"

"No," Oliver tells her.

"You do now," she informs him. "My office in half an hour."

She doesn't wait for a response, which is slightly irksome because he is the CEO and she does work for him, but that doesn't seem to bother her in the least. She just strides off towards the building with a quick, purposeful pace to her step.

"So…," says Digg, moving to stand at his side. "Coffee?"

"Definitely," Oliver mutters.

"Oh, man, why is my face in high def? That screen is ridiculously clear. No one needs to see traces of yesterday's mascara giving me raccoon-eyes from the comfort of their home theater. This is a terrible sales strategy. Also, I need to buy better makeup remover. Clearly. Ugh. Even the electronics are judging me. I am betrayed."

And it's true. Rows upon rows of giant, top-of-the-line televisions line the back wall of the store, all of them currently showing her surprised face earlier this morning with her door half-open and the Darth Vader mug in her hand. Oh man, there are 3D TVs too. That's just amazing. Somewhere, someone is so up-close and personal with her morning that they're practically being attacked by her bedhead.

"You want to talk about betrayal? Try getting knocked up and having the kid make you crave blue raspberry slurpees only to then tap dance on your bladder," Lyla counters, somehow simultaneously looking prepared to defend them from an unforeseen attack and ready to go into labor at any second. "Now that's betrayal."

"I… will leave that entirely to you," Felicity tells her in awkwardly stilted fashion.

"Not a fan of babies?" Lyla questions, sly amusement in her eyes.

"Oh, no. I like them fine. I just also really like things with wires and the inevitable use of them as a teething toy hurts me in my soul," Felicity tells her. "I'm not sure babies and my life will ever mesh in a way that makes sense. Mark me down for babysitting, though."

"I'll take you up on that. You know, I'm a soldier. So's Johnny. Our lives aren't exactly baby-friendly, either," Lyla points out. "Then again, the mini-Diggle wasn't what you might call planned."

"Well best laid plans of mice and men and all of that…" Felicity responds with a shrug before scrunching up her nose as she thinks about the saying. "That's a weird phrase. Do mice plan? I mean beyond the immediate 'how do I get at that cheese' kind of way? I'm thinking no. Maybe that's the
point, though."

"I think you're overthinking it," Lyla tells her, giving Felicity an amused smile before skimming her eyes around the store again.

"That's likely. I overthink most things," Felicity agrees as they walk up to the help desk in the handheld electronics section, drumming her fingernails in a quick little rhythmic beat until the kid sitting behind it looks up. His nametag says he's Nelson and - while she feels kind of bad for thinking so - he looks like a Nelson.

"Hi. How can I help… you," the kid says, eyes widening and voice squeaking on the last word.

To be fair, he looks about the age that his voice still squeaks at random intervals anyhow, but Felicity is thinking that this time it has more to do with the giant TVs behind her with her face on them than it does his hormones.

"Yup. Me. I'm me. Only person I've ever been. And I need two dozen of the new Palmer tablets. Can you help me with that? Please?" She says using her best this-is-not-actually-a-request-so-much-as-an-order look.

"Two… two dozen?" The kid asks, seemingly bewildered by the number.

"Two dozen," Felicity confirms. "As in twenty-four. Do you have that many on hand, Nelson?"

"That's like… a lot of tablets," the kid says with a laugh.

"They're not for me," Felicity tells him. "I don't have that many hands. Obviously."

"Are they… are they for… you know… him?" The kid asks, his eyes darting around the store as if the Arrow might possibly be browsing through the video game section or standing at the check-out line.

Felicity blinks at him for a moment because really? This is how her life is going to be now? It takes everything she has not to pinch the bridge of her nose and shake her head. And the sound of amusement from Lyla isn't helping matters.

"No, I'm mailing them to Batman," she finally says in what she feels is the most obviously sarcastic and dry tone ever.

"Really?" Nelson asks, his eyebrows shooting up and his jaw dropping.

"God, no. Not really. I don't know Batman and I'm pretty sure he has enough tech toys if the media is even halfway correct which - after today - I am starting to wonder about. Because personal experience," Felicity tells him. "Can you just check if you have that many, please? I'm kinda under a time crunch and really I'd prefer not to be here when someone posts a shot of me on Facebook and the news crews get wind of where I am. Can you understand that, Nelson?"

"I… yeah, I guess. I mean being on TV is cool and all but maybe not like all the time and stuff," he says, a bit of a flush working its way across his acne-ridden cheeks.

"Right. Let's go with that," Felicity says because that's so much easier and more efficient than arguing her point with a seventeen year old.

"I'm gonna have to check the stockroom. I'll be right back," Nelson tells her, getting up and hurrying towards a door marked employees only.
"Felicity," Lyla's voice says with wariness as soon as the kid is gone, drawing her attention.

Lyla nods toward the giant display of TVs and Felicity turns toward them to see it's no longer her face on the screen. It's Oliver's.

"What the hell is he doing?" Felicity asks rhetorically, moving a few steps closer to the TVs.

She's really not cursing the high definition now. His face was made for high def. And its like… _everywhere._ She's pretty sure she had a dream like this once..

"Oliver's ever bit the soldier Johnny and I are," Lyla tells her quietly. "You don't ask a soldier to sit it out when his comrades are under fire. It's not in us. We protect our own. And whatever else you might be to him, you are most definitely that."

"It's… I appreciate what he's trying to do but don't you think that'll just make things worse?" Felicity asks nervously, still not dragging her eyes from the TV and half-listening as Oliver explains she's not going to be fired.

Which is nice. Because _yay_ for employment. Also? A little disturbing that apparently this was a question worth asking in the first place in someone's head.

"That depends a lot on what he says," Lyla says wisely.

"Actually what he's saying right now is kind of-" Felicity starts with great affection, her voice cutting off suddenly and her tone shifting dramatically before continuing again. "Did he seriously just call me his secretary? His _secretary?_ Oh his credit score is _so_ trashed."

"Does a credit score matter if you have a billion dollars?" Lyla wonders aloud.

"It's the principle of the thing," Felicity informs her crisply.

Nelson bumbles back onto the sales floor a moment later, a dolly loaded up with boxes in tow. It's eleven o'clock, Felicity notices on one of the infinite number of televisions in front of her, there are two dozen tablets about to be in her possession and she's got an hour to get them to the hospital to keep her promise. Finally, something, _anything_ is going according to plan this morning.

"You've just about cleared us out here," Nelson tells her as he wheels the dolly up next to her, shaking his head as he looks at the boxes.

"They're going to a good home, Nelson. I promise," Felicity says gravely, patting the kid reassuringly on the shoulder. "Now, want to ring me up?"

"Sure," the kid says as he takes the proffered card from her hand.

"Uh… so this isn't your card," he says blinking at her.

"No," she agrees, dragging out the word as she speaks. "It's my boss'. He sent me to buy these. It's all official."

"It's like… twenty thousand dollars and its not your card. It's not even the company card," Nelson argues with her.

She's really starting to dislike Nelson. She does hope that's not starting to show, though, because she's not leaving this stupid store without those tablets and right now Nelson and his adherence to rules are the only thing standing between her and victory. Alright, victory might be a strong word,
"Right. So... you recognized me. Obviously. You did that whole wide-eyed squeak thing that people have apparently started to do when they recognize me today. But anyhow. You watch the news because... well, you don't have a choice, do you? You're pretty much forced to with your help desk facing the televisions and all. But my point is this. You know I work for Oliver Queen. You could, like, turn around right now and see his chiseled face going on about what a valuable asset I am and how I'm not about to be fired. And do you know why he's saying those things Nelson? It's because when he asks me to do something like go get two dozen tablets for him I do it," she monologues. "Now are you going to ring me up or do I really need to call my billionaire boss to get him to authorize a credit card charge that probably costs less than he spends on a case of wine?"

Yeah, that annoyance? Totally showing through. Duplicity has never really been Felicity's strong-suit. So sue her.

"I'm... I'm gonna have to go get a supervisor," Nelson decides aloud.

He stalks off, dragging the dolly with him. As if she - with her face all over all of the TVs - is about to grab them and run. She's not really sure if she wants to groan in frustration or laugh at the mental image of her and Lyla making a break for it with two dozen tablets stuffed in their shirts. Okay, her shirt. Lyla really can't fit anything under hers at this point.

Nelson comes back a moment later with a girl who looks older than him but marginally so. Her name tag is a different color though, so Felicity supposes this is the manager or supervisor or someone with authority who can run the damn card and get her out of here without this taking up an even more absurd amount of time.

"I've got it, Nelson. Can you go check if the software department needs any change?" The girl asks, dismissing the employee before turning back toward Felicity.

"Hi," the girl says, "I'm Kelsey. I'm the floor manager."

And... Felicity really can't figure out the look on her face. It's like she's apprehensive or stunned or something and it doesn't make sense.

"Hi, Kelsey. I'm just trying to buy these for my boss but Nelson wasn't really comfortable running his card for me, I guess. Can we please just ring this up because - between you and me - I'm having an awfully surreal day at this point," she says with a little laugh that's really frustration masking as amusement.

Ironically, she's absolutely sure Tiffany's would have not given her this much trouble.

"Of course," Kelsey says, flushing as she speaks. "I'm so sorry. It's... I can only imagine what you've been through today. I'm... so sorry for all of that. And for making your day harder, Ms. Smoak. I'll definitely ring you up right away."

Felicity blinks in surprise and notes the wary way Lyla is studying the girl. Which is sort of ridiculous if you ask Felicity because Kelsey is a slip of a thing and probably scarcely out of her teens. Then again, she's not about to look a gift-horse in the mouth.

Kelsey uses the register at the help desk and - true to her word - rings them up quickly with no problems. But she smiles a little oddly at Felicity the whole time and it does give her a bit of the heebie-jeebies.

"Do you need help out to the car with these?" Kelsey asks.
"No, thank you. I think we can get them," Felicity replies, pulling some canvas reusable bags out of her purse.

Okay so Captain Planet might have been a big influence on her growing up, alright? Saving the planet is important. Starling City's a part of it, after all, and we all know how important saving that is to their little group.

"Can i just-" Kelsey starts, apparently realizing Felicity is about to walk out the door and whatever she's been not-so-secretly dying to say might never get another chance to be said.

The girl actually puts a hand on Felicity's forearm to stop her, which has Lyla resting her hand on her gun and standing very at attention, but Felicity is still like 99% sure this girl is harmless and she really doesn't want to be the catalyst for her pregnant friend shooting a college kid for so many reasons. So, she just gives the girl a reassuring nod and Kelsey removes her hand and gives a little nervous laugh.

"I can't believe my luck that you came in today, is all," Kelsey says in a quiet voice. "I just… I'd been trying to figure out a way to get him a message for like a year and then after the news and then here you are. It's like it was meant to happen finally, or something and I just… I'm sorry, I know you have a lot going on and you don't know me and you probably don't want to hear me babble at you about this-"

"Kelsey, I'm a babbler, too," Felicity tells her with a kind smile. "I'm like the world champion of babbling. There's possibly a picture of me in the Guinness World Book of Records. I get it. What's this about?"

"Last year… I don't have a car," Kelsey starts. "I can't afford it, really. Not working part-time here and with school and all, so I walk home. And I know, I know it's not a great neighborhood, but I have mace and I figured its just what I have to do, right?"

Felicity's breath catches a little as she thinks she realizes where this is going and she gives the girl a bit of a nod, more serious than before.

"I was closing and it was really late and dark because it was the holiday season and our hours are a lot longer then, so I was walking home and I would have been fine if it had been just one guy, but there were three," Kelsey tells her with gravity and Felicity puts her hand over the other girl's because its shaking so much against the countertop, jittery with nerves and memories.

"I know what they were going to do," Kelsey continues, gulping heavily and blinking as she speaks. "They didn't say it, but one of them hand my hands behind my back and another one had a knife at my neck and the third… he was the worst, he just kept running his fingers through my hair and breathing against my ear and I knew. I've never been that terrified in my life. But then he was there and he shot an arrow the hand of the guy with the knife and he fought them all off like it was the easiest thing in the world. He yelled at me to run home and I did as soon as I could get my feet to listen to me and I will never in my life be able to thank him enough because he saved me. But I didn't tell him. So, I just… I need him to know. It's stupid maybe, because a 'thank you' doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what I owe him, but can you just please, please… just tell him I said 'thank you'?"

Kelsey's eyes are watery and her face is flushed and her hands are still shaking and if Felicity knows that if she ever needs a reminders that what they do is worthwhile, all she will have to do is remember this moment.

"Have you ever talked to anyone about what happened that night before?" Felicity asks her gently.
The girl presses her lips together and shakes her head really hard, fear still evident in the girl's eyes even with the situation long passed. She needs help. She needs to talk to someone. A counselor, a support group, the police. Anyone. And Felicity knows she probably is making a stupid choice here. It's not something she should say, but she's going to anyhow. Because it's the right thing to do.

"I'll make you a deal," Felicity tells her. "I have a friend named Sin who knows a few support groups in the area. Anonymous stuff. I'll have her give you the information. If you promise me you'll go at least once - and that whenever you're ready, you'll talk to someone about what happened - I'll pass on your message to the Arrow."

"Felicity," Lyla says, in a disapproving tone.

"You will?" Kelsey asks, wiping at her eyes as the tears finally spill over.

"First chance I get," Felicity smiles.

They leave a moment later with bags full of tablets and Felicity is pretty sure she only escaped a grateful hug from Kelsey by virtue of the fact that the other girl was working and had something of a managerial role and it wouldn't be professional.

"I can protect you from a lot of things, but not from yourself, you realize?" Lyla asks Felicity, leveling her with a serious look as soon as they're out of the store.

And, yeah, maybe it wasn't the safest move admitting to a total stranger that she would be in contact with the Arrow again, even if the entire planet seemed to be expecting it. But Felicity couldn't bring herself to regret it. Doing the right thing wasn't always doing the safe thing and some risks were worth it.

And besides, Oliver didn't hear nearly enough 'thank yous,' in her opinion.

"You can't save everyone, Felicity," Lyla follows up with.

"Maybe not," Felicity acknowledges. "But that doesn't mean I shouldn't try."
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

This chapter was ready earlier than I expected. And it's long. The next chapter is well underway and will have a scene between Oliver and Sara that I've been very much looking forward to. A lot. I'm *hoping* this weekend for chapter seven, but that's very, very tentative as of right now. But for now... here's chapter six! Enjoy!

When Felicity and Lyla get to Glades Memorial Hospital, no less than four people try to steer them toward Labor and Delivery. Lyla is an exceedingly patient woman, but one can only endure being asked 'Are you sure?' so many times after stating that they are not, in fact, in labor before going a little nuts. Considering Felicity knows the other woman is armed, it's a whole-hearted sigh of relief she lets out when they finally make it to the pediatrics wing.

The Hound was right, Felicity realizes immediately. This place is in desperate need of some help. There were flowers painted along the walls long ago but their once-bright primary colors have dulled into something less than cheerful over time and while the whole place looks clean, it also just looks dingy and uncared for. Kids shouldn't have to live like this. They shouldn't have to deal with pain and fear and uncertainty anywhere, but certainly not in a place as forgotten and joyless as this one.

"Can I help you?" Asks a tired looking nurse with a smile.

She looks kind but overwhelmed and worn down, sort of like the pediatrics wing itself.

"No," Felicity tells her brightly. "Actually we're here to help you. Well… not you exactly. We're not like candy stripers or anything. If that's still a thing. Is that a thing? Nevermind. That's not the point. We're here to help the kids. We had on good authority that they could use some reading material so we have two dozen tablets we'd like to donate to the pediatrics wing for the kids to read on. They're loaded up with credits for e-books already. We did that on the way over."

The nurse blinks owlishly behind her thick glasses, obviously surprised.

"Oh… my that's… well thank you," she says with a little laugh. "I'm not really sure on the procedures for this, but the kids would surely love some tablets. I guess I should call the administrator?"

"Actually… Tracy," Felicity says, noting the woman's badge hanging by a lanyard covered in pink flamingos. "We'd really just prefer to leave it with you. Anonymously."

"That's highly unusual," Tracy says warily, eyeing the bags.

"It's all on the up-and-up. There's a receipt in the bag and everything," Felicity tells her. "And I'm really just the messenger. The person who actually paid for all of these doesn't want the credit. For lots of very valid reasons."

Tracy still looks uncertain, but she can't stop looking at the bags.
"How about this," Lyla speaks up. "Let's say, for a moment, someone left these bags at your work station with a note stating they were being donated to the pediatrics wing. What would happen?"

"Well…” Tracy muses, thinking about it. "I suppose I would call my supervisor and they'd call someone in administration and then they'd call the head of the foundation for charitable gifts."

"Would the kids get the tablets?" Felicity asks.

"Sure. But not immediately," Tracy says.

Felicity sighs at that.

"Unless… well, I could hand them out the kids before calling my supervisor," Tracy says with a bright little mischievous smile. "They wouldn't take them away from the kids."

"In that case, want a hand passing some out?" Felicity asks with a slowly growing grin.

"I'll write the note," Lyla announces, taking the pen Tracy is holding out for her.

Felicity hands one of the bags over the Tracy with a smile which dims only slightly when she realizes the nurse's scrubs are actually covered in very faded cartoonish kangaroos. So creepy. So very creepy. Tracy doesn't notice. She's too busy peering into the bag and laughing sharply as she shakes her head in disbelief.

"You guys are really going to make a difference in a lot of sick kids' lives, you know?" She asks them. "This isn't just books. This is giving them a sense of normalcy and letting them know someone cares. That can do a lot for someone's recovery."

"That's the idea," Felicity says lightly.

She doesn't really want to talk about it more. Sure, it's a great thing they're doing but it wasn't her idea and it's not even her money. She doesn't really feel like she has much to do with it and she definitely doesn't want the credit or gratitude. Besides, something else has suddenly distracted her as she looks past Tracy toward some of the rooms.

"Mind if I start passing some out over there?" Felicity asks, nodding her head past Tracy.

"Sure," Tracy starts.

"Wait for me," Lyla demands, glancing up sharply from the note she's writing.

Felicity has like zero doubts that Digg has given his once-and-future-wife (Felicity can totally see that writing on the wall, even if Digg and Lyla can't seem to quite yet) a very thorough run-down of any and all threats she might be facing including her kidnapper with ties to this pediatrics wing, despite the fact that Felicity is absolutely sure the word 'threat' doesn't apply to him even a little. Still… Felicity knows better than to go up against Lyla. If Lyla wants her to wait, she will. And, in truth, it only takes a moment before Lyla is handing Tracy back the pen and the note and falls into step next to Felicity with a head tilt toward the room Felicity had been looking at.

There's a sickly little girl she can see through the window, its blinds open. She looks to be about eleven or twelve, but it's hard to tell when she's too-thin and swamped under a mound of cheap hospital blankets. A teenage boy is next to her, a library copy of the fifth Harry Potter book opened in his hand as he reads aloud to her. And she doesn't know how, but Felicity knows this is him. Her kidnapper.
She was right, she realizes. He's younger than Roy. And he was right. In spite of the fact that he held her at gunpoint, he's not a villain. Not any more than Digg and Oliver and Roy and Sara are. He's trying to protect someone he loves. People do desperate things - bad things, sometimes - because the consequences of doing anything else are utterly unthinkable.

She knocks softly on the door before pushing it open and he stops reading as she walks in, his eyes widening in surprise as he sees her.

"Hi, I hope I'm not interrupting," Felicity says with a smile.

"You aren't Dr. Ramirez," the little girl says, her pale face screwed up in confusion. "Are you with the transplant people? Did they find a match?"

"I'm not," Felicity says soberly, realizing that this girl's situation is probably far more dire than she'd considered previously. "My name is Felicity and this is Lyla. We're not any kind of a doctor. But Nurse Tracy asked if we could help her pass out some fun stuff that got donated for kids here to use."

"That's good, too," the girl decides with a shrug. "What kind of things? It's not more coloring pages is it? Because I'm done with crayons and smiling flowers."

"I've got a tablet with lots of credits to get all the books you want to read. How does that sound?" Felicity asks her.

The girl's face lights up instantly.

"I dunno, I can read a lot of books," she says with a delighted laugh.

She looks like a whole different kid as joy and excitement runs through her. And it strikes Felicity that this is probably what she looked like before lengthy hospital stays and a transplant wait list were a part of her life. She wishes suddenly, wholeheartedly, that Oliver could see what a difference this little bit of money was making to this little girl. How much better he was making her life with this very small gesture.

"Tell you what," Felicity says. "I'll make you a deal. I'll give you my number and if you actually run out of books, I'll buy you more."

"Seriously?" The girl gasps. "You're like the coolest person ever."

Felicity laughs at that because, honestly, she's been called a lot of things in her day but 'cool' has never been one of them.

"What do you say, Ruthie?" The boy next to her says with a smile and suspiciously watery eyes.

"Thank you! So many 'thank yous!'" She says joyfully, taking the brand new tablet from Felicity's hands with great delight and hugging it tightly.

"You made her day. Probably made her month," the boy says. "Thank you for giving her a reason to smile. She hasn't had many of those in a while."

"Well... someone told me that this place could use some books and some cheer," Felicity tells him knowingly. "Seems like they knew what they were talking about."

"You're a good person, Ms. Smoak," the boy tells her. "I'm really sorry for the hassle the media is giving you. You don't deserve it."
"Thanks, Mr…?" She asks.

"Harrier," he replies. "Marcus Harrier."

"Isn't a harrier a kind of a dog?" Felicity wonders aloud.

"A hound, if I recall," Lyla replies dryly.

Marcus blushes.

Worst hero/villain name ever. Seriously. It would be like her giving herself the secret identity name of Ash or Fire or something.

"Well, Marcus… we've got more of these to deliver. So we'll leave you two to Harry Potter and exploring the tablet," Felicity tells him, handing him her business card as she'd told Ruthie she'd do. "If you guys need more books… just let me know. I mean it."

"I know you do," Marcus tells her. "You seem to be a person who keeps their word. I can't tell you how much I appreciate that. And we will. Let you know if we need more books, I mean. Thank you again."

"Anytime," she responds, waving her fingers a little in Ruth's direction in goodbye.

The girl is too distracted by the tablet to notice, though. But that's more than okay. In fact, it feels like a win in Felicity's book and she leaves the room with her spirits higher than they've been all day.

By the time Oliver has his coffee and has made his way back to the QC office, miraculously unbothered by the media, he's realized something really important. Pamela is, in fact, his employee. He's the CEO. He does not trudge down to her office on the fourth floor for a meeting because she demands it. No. If they need it meet - and, admittedly, they should; even he knows that - then they do it in his office or a conference room.

In any battle, footing is important.

He intends to go straight back to his office, send Pamela an e-mail to meet him in his office at her earliest convenience, and sit back and drink his coffee until she shows up. But, his plan is thwarted by Pamela herself.

He's feeling kind of triumphant prematurely and he walks into his office making a beeline to the computer to tell Pamela how it is when he realizes she's already sitting in the chair across from his desk.

Digg snickers a little from a few paces behind him and Oliver can't help but shoot the other man an annoyed look.

"Sometimes you're so much like your father that it's actually shocking," Pamela tells him.

Oliver flinches at that. He can't help it. Pamela has absolutely no way of knowing how very loaded a statement that really is, but oh man is it ever. Their relationship had been tempestuous at best even when the elder Queen had been alive, but Oliver is even more conflicted these days. He loves his father and he hates his father and he respects his father and he's disappointed in his father and he has only ever wanted to honor his father's memory and Pamela is entirely too good a judge of character for him to be having such thoughts in her presence. Her eyes narrow briefly in a very calculated way.
But she doesn't call him out on anything. For that, he's grateful. Besides, he's pretty sure he's about to be called out on a whole lot of other things.

"He'd have never met me on my turf, either. But at least he called me when I needed to be informed about what was going on. Mostly," Pamela tells him. "You want to sit down?"

It doesn't escape him that she's literally inviting him to sit at his own desk and in spite of the setting she's somehow already totally taken command of the conversation. He can't help but think she'd be incredibly useful in the board room.

He says nothing but sits at his desk - because it's his desk - and eyes her as he takes a large sip of his coffee.

"I thought I had security tighter than this," he says finally. "Mr. Diggle, have a chat with Bruce, will you?"

Digg nods and heads back toward the poor guard who was manning the elevator.

"We've got a problem, Oliver," Pamela starts, leaning her forearms against Oliver's desk. "Do you want to know what it is?"

Oliver's not really sure when they progressed to a first-name-basis and he's starting to wonder if maybe that's not a problem unto itself but he's pretty sure that's not what she means.

"Ms. Smoak is-" He starts before she cuts him off.

"No," she says firmly. "The problem isn't Ms. Smoak. Not really. That's a whole separate issue. We'll get there. Don't worry. For now, the problem is that the CEO of my company doesn't see fit to tell me when there's a newsworthy story or a scandal about to blow. Shaping those stories is my job, Oliver. And I like my job. I'm damn good at my job. But you sure as shit aren't making it easy. Did you know my wife is a cop?"

Oliver's jaw clenches horribly at the 'tonsil hockey' phrase because it's more than that. It's so much more than that. But Pamela can't know that and he can barely acknowledge it so it has to go unsaid and a part of him hates that. A big part of him hates it, actually.

"As a huge part of the population seems to have forgotten recently, Ms. Smoak is entitled to her private life," Oliver says simply.

"Well, then I guess I have to thank Ms. Smoak for the lovely wedding gift you sent us last year. She has excellent taste," Pamela tells him. "But, yes. My wife is a cop. She got woken up early this morning by a call from her captain to help bring someone in for questioning. Do you want to know how I found out my company's CEO's EA is playing tonsil hockey with the vigilante? I'll give you a hint. It wasn't from you. Or your EA. Both of whom should have called me."

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"Right. Sure. As long as it stays private," Pamela tells him flippantly. "You're the goddamned CEO, Oliver. You are this company. And she's the face most people see, the voice most people talk to if they're trying to get through to you. What you do matters. What she does matters. And the very second something is no longer private, it's my damned business because we need to contain the story or frame it or bury it or do whatever we have to do to keep this company's image as good as it can be. And, Oliver? I'm not going to lie. This company's image has been better."
"No one should have taken those pictures of her in the first place," Oliver argues.

"And Monica Lewinsky shouldn't have kept the dress. But she did. And then we ended up with the President debating over what the definition of the word 'is' is," Pamela volleys back. "I don't give a damn what's going on. I get the call first. Not Ms. Smoak or your bodyman or your lawyer. Me. I don't care if you get busted doing blow off the belly of an underage hooker. You call me. Your life is your business and Ms. Smoak's life is her's. I don't care how you live them. I care how it looks and how we can make it look."

"I don't like your tone," Oliver tells her, his voice dangerously close to sounding like the Arrow, but Pamela doesn't even flinch.

"Good," she tells him. "I don't like it either. If you think this is a conversation I wanted to have with you this morning, you're wrong. But you have a long history of very public fuck-ups, Oliver, and to date I've been given a heads up about exactly none of them. That ends now."

"You probably knew about this before I did," Oliver tells her. "I didn't find out until eight this morning."

"Then I should have heard about it from you at 8:01," Pamela says firmly.

"You're right," Oliver concedes.

Pamela is staring at him like she can't believe he's actually agreed. But he does. She's been at Queen Consolidated for as long as he can remember and she has always, always put the company first. He can't even imagine the number of crises she's handled, the number of scandals she's buried. His father may have been an excellent CEO, but he also had no shortage of sins that the media somehow never seemed to catch wind of. Not all of that was Pamela's doing, but he's sure a lot of it was.

This company is his parents' legacy. He wants to preserve that. Overlooking Pamela's usefulness would be a mistake that he's too strategic a person to make.

"My father told me once that you were like a German Sheppard, loyal but fiercely protective," Oliver tells her.

"That or he was calling me a bitch," Pamela says with a shrug. "We butted heads a lot."

"I have no doubt," Oliver smiles lightly. "We will, too. I'm sure. But I try not to make the same mistakes twice. Leaving you in the dark was a mistake. I won't do it intentionally again. Not when something that might effect the company is about to go public. Because you're right. You're good at your job. And it's in all of our best interests that you continue to do it."

"Huh..." she says, sitting back in her chair and staring at him in surprise. "When did you get so reasonable?"

"Shortly after the Gambit sank," he responds bluntly, because that's Pamela's native language and he's sure she will appreciate it.

He's right.

The look she's giving him is calculating and serious as she nods at him.

"My parents worked hard to build this company," Oliver elaborates. "Running it might never have been my ambition, but QC and me and… Thea… we're all that's left of them now."
There's a slight jerk of Pamela's head when Oliver pauses before Thea's name and Oliver sucks in a breath because he knows exactly what that movement means. He has no doubt at all.

"You know," he says in surprise, with absolutely no question in his voice.

"I didn't know you did," Pamela tells him with surprise. "I've been protecting your family's secrets a very long time, Oliver.

"My mother told you? Why? When did you find out?" He demands.

"Who do you think paid off the doctors? Moira wasn't going to let anything get traced back to her," Pamela tells him. "And neither was I."

"Did you tell my father?" Oliver asks, intensely curious.

"No," Pamela says, looking at him like he's ridiculous. "Of course not. I already told you - I don't care what any of you do in your private lives. That's not my business. My only concern is the company's image."

"Just how many of my family's secrets are you protecting?" Oliver asks her.

"Probably more than you are," Pamela responds glibly, which Oliver sincerely hopes isn't true. "But enough about history. We need to talk about the now."

"Yeah. Fine," Oliver says, sitting back, waiting for the first volley.

"Talk to me about Ms. Smoak," Pamela says.

There are so many ways Oliver could respond to that, but everything that flits through his head immediately isn't something he wants to give voice to. Not here. Not to her. Maybe not to anyone.

"What do you want to know about her?" Oliver asks, deflecting.

"Don't do that," Pamela orders.

"Do what?"

"Avoid questions so obviously. Not with the media and not with me. It makes you look like you're hiding something. It's barely a step up from saying 'no comment,'" she advises.

"What's wrong with saying 'no comment'?" He asks bewildered.

Pamela pinches the bridge of her nose.

"Everything," she says tightly. "We'll have a meeting to go over some media relations basics soon. Very soon. Just... don't ever say 'no comment. Please."

"Okay..." say Oliver slowly, not understanding even a little why this is an issue.

"Let's try this again. Ms. Smoak. Tell me about her," Pamela demands.

He's more prepared this time.

"She's a huge asset to the company. She's an MIT graduate and computer genius. She flatly refuses to get me coffee, but she's great at managing my schedule, even when I'm habitually late, and she makes an excellent sounding board when I need an opinion, which is something she's never without.
I'm lucky to have her. QC is lucky to have her," he says, feeling pretty proud of his accurate and very innocent depiction of her.

"How long have you been sleeping with her?" Pamela asks him.

"I'm not," Oliver replies, trying very, very hard to ignore the mental images that such a question evokes.

He mostly fails.

"Say it again. This time make me believe it," Pamela counters.

"I'm not," Oliver says, a whole lot more anger in his voice.

"There is literally no one who believes that," Pamela informs him expressionlessly. "Including me."

"Well it's the truth," Oliver says with frustration. "You want my secrets? Fine. Here's one of my biggest ones. She is the only damn reason I'm anywhere near capable of running this company. I couldn't do this - any of it - without her. She's brilliant and charismatic and incredibly dedicated and if I were half as good at my job as she is at hers then QC would be better off."

"You're starting to scare the hell out of me, Oliver," Pamela tells him warily.

"What? Why?"

"Because this is starting to sound a whole lot worse than if you were sleeping with her."

"Fine. Then spin it. That's what you do, right?" Oliver snaps.

"Don't get testy with me," Pamela says. "I said it was worse, not unmanageable. Please do your best not to insinuate that you can't run this company without your EA guiding you from now on, okay? I'll work on the rest."

"Fine," he agrees.

"Let's say I believe you. Let's say you really aren't sleeping with her-" Pamela starts.

"You know what?" Oliver asks with serious irritation and very much looking forward to sparring with Sara all of the sudden. "I don't care if you believe it or not."

"See?" Pamela asks, smiling. "Now I believe you."

"You're infuriating," Oliver tells her.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she counters.

"You would."

"Did you know about her involvement with the vigilante?" Pamela asks.

"We don't really talk about our personal lives much," Oliver responds.

"That's… almost an answer," Pamela says, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"I knew she'd met him. He saved her from that lunatic who called himself the Count," Oliver reminds her. "If they're… involved, she didn't tell me about it. Believe me, I was at least as surprised
about those pictures as you were."

"See, now I'm back to not being sure if I believe that you aren't sleeping with her," Pamela says shaking her head. "There's something here I'm not quite seeing."

"I gave you one secret. You don't get all of them," Oliver tells her seriously.

"Fair enough."

Everything goes fairly smoothly for Felicity and Lyla at the hospital, so of course when they leave twenty minutes later everything swiftly goes downhill. Rapidly. Karma's I.O.U. list is really getting absurdly long at this point.

It's not the media that poses a problem this time, though they don't know that at first. Felicity and Lyla walk into the parking garage, Felicity talking a mile-a-minute about the kids and the tablets and how much she wishes she could do more for Ruth and Marcus, when Lyla freezes and grabs Felicity firmly by the arm, cutting her off mid-sentence.

"What is it?" Felicity asks.

"I saw something. One minute," Lyla responds crisply, drawing her gun, her eyes skimming methodically over the parking garage once more.

Felicity scarcely breathes as she follows Lyla's line of sight, trying to figure out what's drawn the soldier's concern. They both spy movement and a reflected flash of light at the same time. Felicity would have dismissed it as a car's mirror catching the light or a media flashbulb, if she'd even noticed it at all without Lyla's presence, but Lyla knows better.

"Down!" Lyla commands sharply, pushing Felicity behind her and low enough that a mid-sized sedan blocks her from view.

The gunshots start a fraction of a second later.

Felicity can't see what's going on, but she can hear enough to scare the hell out of her. There's more than one gunman, she can tell that just from the shots, but she doesn't know how many.

"Three," Lyla says, as if reading her thoughts.

The very pregnant woman has crouched down next to her, both of them using an unfortunate Honda Civic as cover.

"Call Oliver?" Felicity asks, because honestly that's her first instinct in most situations.

"Too far," Lyla says quietly, tilting her head as she listens to the way the gunshots echo around the parking garage and the din of footsteps. "I got this."

And she does. Lyla is badass. Like, possibly she should have a mask or a hood and a code name.

It isn't like the movies. It isn't even like when Oliver fights. Lyla's more cautious with her own safety than that and she's fully aware of exactly how many bullets are in her gun. She waits for exactly the right moment, listens and judges distance and direction from the echoing in the garage. And when she's ready, she stands with clear determination, gun already aimed, lets off one shot and drops back down.

Felicity can hear a body hit the ground with a thud and a curse from one of the other men.
At least she thinks it's a curse. It's in Mandarin. And she shudders a little as she realizes what that means.

"Triad," Lyla confirms quietly.

Felicity nods hard as adrenaline pumps through her body, making her alert and a little jittery, making everything sound so much louder and so much closer. A couple of street thugs coming after her, she'd kind of expected. But Chinese organized crime? Not so much. She doesn't know how to process that, but it's absolutely terrifying.

Lyla doesn't seem phased by it, though. And Felicity is like epic amounts of grateful for that.

The other woman rises again, three shots in quick succession with two different targets. There's another thud and a pained scream and Lyla grabs Felicity's arm again.

"Move. Now," Lyla orders, pulling her toward her car.

She shouldn't look. She knows she shouldn't. But she can't help it. There's so much blood. Felicity's seen enough wounds at this point to know just from the size of the quickly growing pool of red that one of the men is dead. Another is lying at a horribly unnatural angle that probably means he's met the same fate. The third, the screaming man has a bullet wound in his gut, but he's conscious and still holding his gun. Felicity lets out a little yelp, but Lyla is ready.

The man fires at nearly the same moment Lyla does. The bullet is close enough that it probably hits Lyla's hair, but Lyla's bullet hits the man in his center mass and he goes down instantly, eyes unfixed and suddenly dull.

"Go, go, go," Lyla orders.

"Are you okay?" Felicity asks as she scrambles toward her car, keys already in hand as she fumbles for the right one.

"Fine. I'm not hit," Lyla says, moving toward the passenger side, gun still at the ready.

"He practically gave you a haircut, Lyla," Felicity says as she unlocks the door to her car and slides into the driver's seat.

Lyla ignores the comment. She's not in a joking mood, though she probably recognizes it as the coping mechanism it is from Felicity. Lyla is still on edge, still all business and every inch the soldier she has been trained to be.

"Get to Queen Consolidated and don't stop unless you have to," Lyla commands, rolling down the passenger window, gun still firmly in her grip.

"Do you think there are more of them?" Felicity asks as she starts the engine and pulls the car into reverse.

"I think the Chinese Triad has no shortage of hitmen," Lyla tells her. "Though they probably thought three men were more than enough to take you out."

"How many more bullets do you have in that thing?" Felicity asks, glancing toward Lyla's gun.

"Three," Lyla tells her without looking her direction.

"More would be better," Felicity says as the car exits the parking garage and pulls into daylight.
"I have another magazine," Lyla says reassuringly.

"See, when I say things like that I mean Cosmo or Developer Network Journal, not bullets for a glock," Felicity says with a sharp laugh.

"It's a desert eagle, actually," Lyla says, shooting her a very quick and slightly amused look.

"Right. My mistake," Felicity says, another nervous laugh bubbling up.

This isn't the first time her life has been in danger. Not by a longshot. But that doesn't make it any easier. She knows how this goes. She'll hold it together through sheer will and adrenaline because she has to. Later, though, when the immediacy of the terror is over and the adrenaline crashes, she'll sweat and shake uncontrollably and she'll be cold no matter how many blankets she buries herself under. She hates the fallout from life-and-death situations nearly as much as she hates being shot at and, really, that's saying a lot.

"Focus on driving and keep your breathing even and slow. It'll help," Lyla tells her wisely. "You're fine. You're doing fine."

"Am I that obvious?" Felicity asks, speeding through a yellow light. "I mean, in the last two years I've been in all sorts of oh-god-oh-god-I-might-die-any-second situations. I know I'm shaking on the inside, but I sort of had this illusion that I was pulling off the cool-as-a-cucumber routine on the outside."

"Maybe to some people, but you don't do two tours of duty in Afghanistan without learning what the terror of battle does to your body," Lyla tells her. "After my first firefight I puked on my C.O.'s shoes. Trust me. You're doing fine."

Felicity just bites her lip and nods at that, trying to take Lyla's advice about taking slow, even breaths. They haven't run into any problems since they left the garage and Lyla is apparently comfortable enough with the situation that she puts her gun down and grabs her phone instead, but her eyes still never stop skimming their surroundings for potential threats.

"Hey Johnny," she hears Lyla say into the phone. "We've got a bit of a problem…"

It is, apparently, John Diggle's day to be the bearer of bad news. It's a role he doesn't relish. Especially because it's Oliver he has to give the news to. Again. As if having to tell the other man that he'd been busted as his alter ego kissing his supposedly platonic friend/tech support and that the media and the cops were going ballistic hadn't been bad enough. He silently vows that the next bad news gets to be delivered by Roy. There should be a schedule.

Oliver is still meeting with Pamela, a pit bull of a woman that Digg privately thinks will do them way more good than harm, when he reenters Oliver's office. Oliver looks up, confusion initially written across his face, but it gives way to cautious concern almost immediately because Oliver and Diggle can read each other very well by now.

"What happened?" Oliver asks, standing from his chair.

"We've got a security problem," Diggle tells him, sparing a glance toward Pamela.

"Digg," Oliver damn near growls. "What happened."

"They're fine," he starts, eyes boring into Oliver's because he really, really wants to drive that point home before he says anything else. "Neither of them got hurt, but Lyla just called. Some men
attacked them at the hospital."

Oliver is tense and angry, fists with white knuckles pressed into his desk like he's ready to punch something. But John's done battle long enough to recognize beneath the anger and fury lies absolute terror. Some emotions are easier to deal with than others and Oliver would rather feel anything - or nothing - instead of fear.

"They'll be here in five, Oliver. They're fine," he reiterates.

"Who?" Oliver asks grittily, not needing to elaborate.

"Triad, apparently," John replies.

Oliver hisses through his teeth in response. The Triad is bad news. They have men and resources and money and protecting her from them is so much worse than trying to protect her from some punks in the Glades with a grudge. But the Triad has definitely just risen in the ranks of the Arrow's hit list very quickly. John has no doubt about that.

"I need details," Pamela speaks up, notepad at the ready. "This'll hit the news and we need to be ready."

"Three men opened fire on them in the parking garage of the hospital. They took cover, Lyla… her security detail… returned fire and neutralized all three," John informs her.

"And by neutralized you mean…?" Pamela asks, voice trailing off.

"Killed," John clarifies unapologetically.

Pamela looks a little annoyed at this but says nothing about it.

"Who provided this security detail?"

"I did," John says, surprising her. "Lyla's my… ex-wife. She and I served in Afghanistan together and she's done security work before. Felicity's a friend to both of us. Lyla was happy to offer to help keep her safe for the time being."

Pamela hums speculatively at that and Diggle can practically see wheels turning in the other woman's head.

"And why was she at the hospital?" Pamela asks.

"She was dropping some things off for a friend," Oliver supplies. "She's fine? You're sure?"

"They're fine," John says pointedly, because he gets Oliver's concern for Felicity. He shares it, but Lyla is nine-months pregnant with his baby and a little concern there might not be amiss. "Not even a scratch. On either of them."

"Police on the scene, yet?" Pamela asks.

"I called Captain Lance on my way up here," John tells her. "He'll be by later for their statements, but there's surveillance video of the garage and it'll back up Lyla and Felicity's stories. There shouldn't be any problems with that. It's a clear case of self defense."

"Well thank goodness for that, anyhow," Pamela says sharply. "Looks like I might need to tweak the press release I drafted earlier. And I'll definitely need to talk to Ms. Smoak."
"No," Oliver says sharply.

"Not the press, Oliver. Me. This isn't negotiable," Pamela insists.

"Like hell, it's not," Oliver responds.

Oliver is primed for a fight. That much is obvious and there's really no one else around to do battle with but Pamela and John's more than a little concerned about how this is all going to play out, but they're all saved when the elevator dings and Felicity and Lyla walk out.

Oliver crosses the room immediately in a few very large strides, his focus completely honed in on Felicity. She's looking back at him with relief, like she finally feels safe now that she's with him. And in that way they so often have, they seem to create their own little world, shutting everyone and everything else out. John's used to it. Lyla's even seen it a few times. But Pamela, he's sure, is watching this all like a hawk.

Anger melts away on Oliver's face when he's toe-to-toe with Felicity. It's all concern and fear now. It's Oliver at his rawest and most honest. He's got one hand on her forearm and the other brushing some hair behind her ear. He shouldn't be doing this. Not now. Not here. Not in front of Pamela. But Oliver seems to have completely dismissed the older woman's presence.

"You're okay?" He asks her, blue eyes searching her face.

"Peachy," she replies, nodding. "Don't ever go up against Lyla in Halo. That's what I learned today. Amongst other things. It's been a really weird day. I kind of want it to be over already. Can I just go home and go to bed now? I bet my bed misses me."

"You're not going home," Oliver says decisively.

"Well not right now," Felicity responds.

"Not anytime soon," Oliver tells her.

"Oliver," she says warningly.

"Felicity," Oliver says back in the same tone.

"Oliver," she says a little more sharply.

The two stare each other down for a moment. Oliver's hand has fallen away from her hair but he can't seem to get himself to let her arm go. It's like he's afraid if he's not in contact with her she'll fade away in front of him.

"So, how was your morning?" Digg asks Lyla, tilting his head only slightly to spare her a glance as their friends have a nonverbal conversation in front of them.

Lyla's still sort of watching Oliver and Felicity like they might be a spectator sport.

"Eh, you know. Same old thing," Lyla shrugs nonchalantly. "You?"

"Yeah, pretty standard." John nods.

Neither Oliver nor Felicity pay them any attention. They're still in their own world, population of two.

"It's not safe, Felicity. The Triad is after you and they aren't going to stop until you're dead. I refuse
to sit back and let you be in danger. We need to keep you safe," Oliver insists.

"And how do we do that?" She asks with frustration. "We let them scare me out of my home. Then what? Where do I go then? Anyone I stay with is just in more danger because I'm there and a hotel is no safer."

"I don't know," he admits. "We'll come up with something. We'll figure it out. Just... you can't go back there."

"I don't want to be scared out of my own home, Oliver," she tells him, her eyes begging him to understand.

"Felicity, please, I need to know you're safe," Oliver says, his voice heavy with things they don't give voice to.

Felicity stares back, her eyes stray to his lips and back up to his eyes, and they just look at each other. It's so loaded and so tense that the air in the room seems to thicken. They don't say anything. They don't do anything. But the chemistry sizzles between them and Felicity eventually gives him a little nod.

"God this is like me and Suzy Olson in high school all over again," Pamela says, jarring both of them from their connection to look at her. "It's actually sort of painful to watch. And I was right. This is so much worse than you sleeping with her."

Oliver's fingers twitch against Felicity's arm and Felicity's cheeks flush in embarrassment. It doesn't escape John that Oliver has positioned himself so he's between Felicity and Pamela. It's a protective stance, putting himself between her and danger, whatever its definition of the moment might be. He wonders if Oliver even realizes he's doing it. He's sure that Pamela does.

"Do we still have company apartments on the top floor?" Oliver asks Pamela, shifting the woman's focus wholly to him.

Pamela's eyes go wide at the question.

"That's a horrible idea," she responds blatantly.

"It's the best idea I've had all day," Oliver tells her.

"That doesn't speak well for your day, then," Pamela says with finality. "In theory, those apartments are meant for visiting board members, heads of QC satellite offices and bigwigs from rival companies. In practice, all of those people would rather stay at the Four Seasons. If you want to continue to try to sell the idea that your EA isn't your mistress, it's probably best to avoid putting her up in a QC owned penthouse. They've barely been used in the last seven years."

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what Pamela is implying. But John knows that Oliver will push that aside for now. He's got enough to deal with today without bringing his father's long-past infidelities into the mix. His concerns are far more immediate and far more pressing.

"If it comes down to Felicity being slaughtered by the Triad or some rumors, I don't care what people think," Oliver says boldly.

He should care, though. He'll realize that later, when everything settles down. Everyone thinks Felicity is dating the Arrow and everyone thinks Felicity is sleeping with Oliver. Fanning those rumors, even a little, can only lead to disaster.
"What if it's not his idea?" John wonders aloud, grabbing all of their attention.

"Explain," Pamela says.

"She was just attacked. That's going to go public. And Oliver made a point of telling reporters how important his employees' safety is to him just a couple of hours ago. It makes sense for her to stay there. The idea just shouldn't be coming from him. It should be coming from the head of QC security," John explains.

"Huh... that might work," Pamela muses. "It sets quite a precedent. We may end up housing other employees if we go that route, domestic violence victims or people whose homes flood or get burned down."

"We should be doing that already anyhow," Oliver tells her. "We have those apartments for a reason. They shouldn't just be sitting empty if they can benefit the company's employees."

"Well alright then. I can surely spin that," Pamela says with a nod. "I'll talk to the head of security. I want you staying out of it. Ms. Smoak? We're going to chat later. It sounds like I know where I can find you. I'm glad you're okay."

"Thank you. I'm glad I'm okay, too," Felicity says with a thin smile toward Pamela.

"Oliver, there's a ton going on. But I need to know I've got all the parts of it. Is there anything else I need to know about before I go?" Pamela asks.

"No," Oliver says with the lying face he somehow manages to pull off on everyone other than Felicity. "Nothing."

"Well thank God for that," Pamela says. "I have work to get done. I'll e-mail you the press release as soon as I have a completed draft. If anything happens, you know how to reach me. Remember, first call."

"Got it," Oliver confirms and with that Pamela walks out and heads back down to her office.

Felicity's eyes cast down to where Oliver is still holding her arm, his fingers curled around it gently, his thumb stroking absently at the skin above her wrist. Her eyes flutter shut and she bites her lower lip before stepping back and putting a little bit of distance between them. Oliver's fingers automatically twitch in her direction like he's trying to hold on, but judging from the look on his face, John is dead-certain that the other man had no idea he had been holding onto her in the first place.

"They're ridiculous," Lyla sighs under her breath, too quiet for the duo to hear. John doesn't disagree.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

There are two people I've been remiss in thanking so far and I need to fix that now. Firstly, my beta/cheerleader/brainstorm-partner Andacus. There is very little more valuable when writing than someone who tells you when something doesn't work. I'm lucky to have her and she made this chapter (in particular) far better than it would have been without her (She also introduced me to the show, so there's that, too). Secondly, my incredibly supportive husband who has, for months on end now, said to me "I'll watch the kids for a few hours. You go to a coffee shop with your laptop and write for a bit. Your writing is important." This story couldn't exist without either of them. Period. So, this is a great big 'thank you' to both of them.

The apartments at Queen Consolidated are sterile. This is not to say, unfortunately, that they are particularly clean, but rather that they wholly lack any sort of personality. Felicity will infuse the musty space with her own unique stamp in no time, though. Oliver has no doubt of that. It's just her way. Between her influence and a good airing out of the long unused space, it will feel like home in no time.


He doesn't really stick around to see Felicity settled in. Digg stays with her while Lyla makes a run back to her apartment to pack a bag, but Oliver has enough sense to realize that helping her essentially move into an apartment he sort of owns is dangerously domestic and a very slippery emotional slope which he's already got uneven footing on. He's good at self-control but even he has his limits. Obviously. Look at what happened yesterday.

Leaving the office, he doesn't even think about where he's headed. There was never much of a question. Sara promised to spar against him later and that idea has literally never been more appealing to him than it is right now.

His bike sort of steers itself toward Verdant, winding through the streets of its own accord, and even just the sight of the club's familiar industrial building makes him feel a little more settled as it comes into view. That feeling dissipates quickly as he goes inside though and finds that not only isn't Sara there yet, but Felicity's computers are beeping at a ridiculously alarming rate.

He tries to ignore it at first, changes into appropriate workout clothes while he attempts to tune out the noise, but he can't. Every single stupid beep is a reminder of what's going on, that the media is all over her and it's his fault and there's so very little he can do to make anything better. He should probably call Digg to have him ask Felicity how to get the damn machines to shut up - Felicity has turned off her ringer, he knows, because someone tracked down her number and it had been ringing non-stop - but he doesn't. Instead, he breaks a cardinal rule of the lair and tries to turn it all off.
himself.

Felicity's computers are more complex than your average PC and just turning off the speakers doesn't stop the noise. He eventually settles on yanking cords (with more force than is really necessary), which he's sure she will not be thrilled about later, but right now he just needs the noise to stop before he puts an arrow to the machine. Comparatively, she'll be far less pissed off about a few yanked cords. Surely.

"Now what did Fletch ever do to you?"

Oliver looks up to the top of the stairs to see Sara standing there, a hand on her hip and her head cocked to the side. He's happier to see her now than he ever was when they were dating, which says a lot of things he'd rather not think about. Oliver's pretty good about choosing to avoid things to think about, really. Call it a skill.

"Did everyone know the computer has a name but me?" Oliver asks bewilderedly.

"Probably," Sara says, making her way down the stairs. "She's going to be livid that you touched her machines, you know?"

"I'll deal with it," Oliver says, shifting from one foot to the other with nervous energy.

"Yeah. You're fantastic at dealing with issues you two have between each other," Sara snorts.

"Didn't you say you wanted a weapon in your hand before we had this conversation?" Oliver asks, his voice dropping to a near growly level.

"Oh, Ollie," Sara laughs. "I haven't even started yet."

That's really not reassuring.

She's already dressed for sparring and she moves to the mats with a sort of predatory grace, grabbing a staff as she goes before turning to him with a raised eyebrow in invitation. Staves are more her strong suit than his. He's far more comfortable with a bow or his fists or even a knife, but if he's looking for a way to lose himself in the rush of conflict - and he definitely is - then staves will work as well as anything else.

She lands the first blow, scarcely a second after he has a weapon in his hands, and the swift hit to his flank throws him a little. Sara's not gentle. There will definitely be a bruise.

"So... You and Felicity," she starts in on him.

"There is no 'me and Felicity," he replies half-truthfully, deflecting a blow.

"Your mouth says no now but it sure looked like it was saying yes last night," she smirks, going with the flow of her momentum and letting the staff flip around so it nearly smacks him in the head.

"Very funny," he growls, ducking his head just in time as they start to circle each other.

"I'm a funny girl," she shrugs.

"This is what you wanted to talk about?" he asks, jumping over a sweep of her staff.

"You need to stop being a dumbass about her," Sara says by way of confirmation.

Oliver blinks in surprise. It's enough of an opening that she lands another hit, this time across his
thigh and he winces at the sting.

"I need to keep my distance from her. It's better for everyone," Oliver responds, swiping at her with his staff, which she stops with a clash from her own.

"Yeah, that's bullshit," Sara tells him. "And I'm pretty sure you already know that."

He manages to avoid another blow from her staff, but only just and the woosh of air that flows past his face is clear evidence of just how near a hit she came.

"If I get distracted, people die. If I get invested in my own life, other people start losing theirs," he argues, using both words and the staff to make his point.

Sara deftly dodges both.

"You've been focused on surviving for too long, Ollie. We both have. It's easy to forget that's not the same thing as living. You start to feel like you don't even deserve it," Sara tells him as she sidesteps a thrust of his staff.

"I have a mission," he volleys, swinging his staff to strike against her stomach. "This city needs me. I lived my life just for myself once. It went poorly, which I'm pretty sure you remember."

"And you think… what? That spending the first half of your twenties drunk and bed-hopping used up your quota for happiness?" She asks with an air of disbelief, easily deflecting his blow. "The mission is great. Having purpose is great. But being this? Just being this? It's easier and it's safer, but it's not enough. If you think the only reason we wear masks is to hide who we are from other people, you're kidding yourself."

He lands a hard strike against the backs of her knees and she falls with a hiss before hopping up to a defensive stance.

"That's an awful lot of wisdom about the importance of being happy from a woman who's got continents between her and the woman she loves," Oliver points out.

"This isn't about me and Nyssa," Sara tells him. "We aren't the same as you and Felicity. And we aren't the focus of this conversation."

"Why not?" Oliver asks, their staves clashing against each other.

"Because I'm not the one busted on the front page of the Washington Post with his feelings written all over his half-obscured face," Sara counters. "I like Felicity. And I love you. But you need to figure out what you're doing because this? This isn't working."

"It will work. It is working," he argues, their staves meeting each other with a series of loud cracks. "I just messed up yesterday. It won't happen again."

"Yesterday is just a symptom," Sara tells him, shoving her staff against his to put a little distance between them and regroup. "You think you're less distracted by her just because you aren't sleeping with her? Stop kidding yourself, Oliver! It will happen again. And again. And again. Because you're drawn to her. Because you're human, which is something you seem to have forgotten."

"The Arrow doesn't have the luxury of personal relationships. The Arrow is the mission. That's all he can be," Oliver says, circling her and spinning his staff as he goes, looking for an opening to strike.

"Oh, would you stop talking about yourself in the third person already? You aren't just Oliver Queen
and you aren't just the Arrow. You never were. And the sooner you realize that and manage to find some kind of balance, the better off everything will be," Sara informs him, rolling her eyes.

"I can't do this and be the kind of person she deserves to be with," Oliver says definitively.

"Making choices about what other people deserve for themselves is one of your least attractive qualities, you realize?" Sara asks, parrying a swift jab of Oliver's staff and smacking her own against the inside of his elbow.

The entire sparring session has not really gone his way. Sara's had the upper hand almost the entire time and it lends extra frustration to their conversation, but Oliver can't concede. Not the fight and not his point. He's never taken well to losing.

"It's a good thing I'm not trying to be attractive then," Oliver counters.

"She's obviously crazy about you. Why do you think she would want you to be anything other than what you already are? Arrow and all?" Sara presses, head cocked to the side as she studies him.

"Maybe I don't want to change her. Maybe I don't want the death and the darkness that follows me around to bleed over into her," Oliver says.

"Maybe you're being ridiculous," Sara counters. "Maybe you're underestimating her."

"I don't know why I'm even listening to this," Oliver bites out, throwing his staff to the mat in frustration and backing up to the solid concrete floor.

"Because you need to hear it," Sara tells him bluntly.

"I love her, Sara. Okay? Is that what you want to hear? I'm in love with her," Oliver snaps.

"Okay," she responds completely non-pulsed, but it's obvious Oliver is expecting her to say more. "So you love her. So what?"

"I… what do you mean so what?"

"I mean so what?" She asks, putting back her own staff and crossing her arms in front of her, a challenge written across her face. "Despite what the Beatles might have you believe, love is not actually all you need. So you love her. That's great. Now what?"

"Now… nothing," he says, a sense of resignation hanging in the air.

"What good does that do either one of you if you keep living in this state of limbo? How is that fair to you or to her?"

"It's not," he admits. "It's just how it has to be."

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to love someone who thinks they aren't worthy of being loved?" Sara asks him. "Someone who puts literally everyone else in the world's well-being above their own? It hurts. It hurts like nothing else does. Don't do that to her. Don't keep doing that to her. She deserves better than that. And so do you."

He doesn't have words for that. He wants to scream and find a real fight and vent his frustration, but it's not going to help and he knows it. That would solve nothing. He roughly runs both of his hands through his close-cropped hair and gives Sara a weighty look.

"I'm not trying to make this harder for you, you know," she tells him. "I'm trying to get you to make
it easier on yourself."

"You have a funny way of going about it," Oliver tells her with a dry laugh.

"There's nothing funny about it at all," Sara responds, looking more sympathetic than she has this entire conversation. "Have you even thought about how this affects her?"

"Don't do that," Oliver says, his voice dangerously near a growl.

"Do what?" Sara challenges, because she's never caved to him even once and she's not about to start now. "Point out that Felicity loves you and that every inch of pain you're putting yourself through you're putting her through too?"

Oliver's face crumbles at that and his fingers curl around the edge of Felicity's desk like he's holding on to that to keep himself from hitting something. Maybe he is. Felicity's been his anchor in a lot of ways for a long while now.

"It's not the same," he says, his voice tinged with a note of desperation like he's begging for this to be the truth by his will alone. "For her. It's not. She doesn't feel… There's something, but… It's just not the same."

"Is that what you're telling yourself?" Sara asks with disbelief and a shake of her head. "Oliver, come on. She doesn't just love you. She believes in you and she accepts you exactly as you are. Do you have any idea how damned lucky you are to have someone like that in your life?"

"Stop," Oliver demands, looking like she's socked the wind out of him with words alone.

Sara does. Less because of the word and more because of the way he looks at her, like a cornered wild animal. He needed to hear this, all of it, but maybe it's too much, too fast. So she backs off.

"Just… think about it," Sara says casually with a shrug, like they'd been discussing something trivial instead of his mess of an abbreviated love life.

"Pretty sure you haven't given me much option on that," Oliver responds with a scoff.

"Yeah…" Sara says, watching him with pinched lips and a piercing gaze. "That was kind of the idea."

Felicity's first thought upon entering one of the QC studio apartments had been that it felt like a hotel room. That was a good thing in her book because people didn't stay in hotel rooms. They didn't live in them. Hotels were temporary. And so was this.

She could do this. For a few days. For a week. That would be okay. That would be fine.

Then Lyla came back and it wasn't just with one bag. Every suitcase Felicity owned (and two she didn't) were wheeled into the spartan temporary space she was occupying. Roy followed a moment later, apparently having helped Lyla out, with a cooler in hand.

They'd brought the perishable goods out of her fridge.

Now, looking down into the cooler at a half empty jar of marinara sauce and a third of a jug of milk, everything starts to crash in on her. She isn't going home. Not anytime soon. This is far less temporary than she'd convinced herself of and despite their plan to manage the media and the cops
and the criminals, there really was no end in sight.

"Thanks guys. Can you give us the room for a minute?" She hears Digg ask.

She senses more than sees that Roy and Lyla have left. She can't stop staring at the marinara. And it's stupid. It's so stupid that after everything today this is the point where she feels like she's going to break. Because of half-eaten pasta sauce.

"It's okay if you do," Digg says to her.

She looks up at him with a question written across her face until she realizes she must have said at least some of that out loud.

"Everybody's got their breaking point, Felicity," Digg tells her seriously. "You've been through a hell of a lot in the last day. There's nothing wrong with taking a moment for yourself and letting it catch up with you. That's better than bottling it up."

The 'like Oliver does' end to that sentence goes unsaid but she hears it anyhow and lets out a humorless little laugh.

"I don't want to be here, John," she tells him seriously.

She could mean literally or she could mean figuratively, even she's not sure, but John doesn't seem to need clarification.

"I know," he says with a sympathetic half smile.

He doesn't try to placate her or convince her that everything is fine and she loves him a little more for that. Everything's not fine. Her life is in danger. She's practically in hiding. She's gone from relatively unknown to sort of infamous overnight and she doesn't know if her reputation - professional or otherwise - will ever recover from this. Her 'promotion' and the rumors surrounding it were bad enough, but being nationally known as the Vigilante's girlfriend - which is horribly, ironically untrue - adds a whole new layer to how people see her and for the most part she's thinking it's not exactly positive.

"How do we come back from this?" She asks, looking to Digg.

"Same way we do everything," he responds immediately, with a large comforting hand on her shoulder. "Together. I've got your back. You know that."

Her hand rests on top of his and gives it a squeeze in gratitude before she sighs and looks around the room, both of their hands falling away. It's a large space, at least, but so cold.

"Think Oliver would mind if I painted?" She asks, only partly kidding.

"I don't think Oliver would mind if you tore down walls, Felicity," Digg says, levelling her a look that says 'you are kidding me right now, right?'

She flushes a little and shifts her weight between her feet awkwardly for a moment before grabbing the cooler and walking over to the kitchenette. She puts the marinara away first. And even if it's been an exhausting, emotional roller-coaster kind of a day, she doesn't break and she doesn't cry. She's stronger than this. And things could be a lot worse.

"Who do you suppose the last person to stay here was?" She wonders aloud, looking around the studio.
"I really don't think you'd want to know," John replies.

Felicity scrunches up her nose as she thinks about that. It's true. Regardless of who it was, she doesn't want to know. Because, really, the options are all terrible. God, she hopes it wasn't Isabel. Or Robert Queen. Or Isabel and Robert Queen. Ew.

"You're right. I just hope they've sanitized the place," she decides, glancing over at the absurdly large bed.

"I'll pick you up some Lysol, just in case," Digg tells her, wincing as he follows her gaze.


John snorts in response and shakes his head. Kindly, he doesn't say whatever he's thinking. Really, she loves John kind of a lot.

A knock at the door startles them, changing the atmosphere suddenly and drastically. Digg's hand is on his sidearm before Felicity is even done blinking and his whole frame is caution and alertness. Because of a knock on the door. At Queen Consolidated. It strikes Felicity again that she sort of can't believe how this has become her life.

He gestures for her to get behind him, away from the door, before he goes to glance out the peephole. Immediately he sighs and lets go of his gun. He gives her a tight grimace before going to open the door and she can't quite read his expression, but it all makes sense when he opens the door and she sees Captain Lance and Orrin Bryce standing with Lyla.

"You're a popular woman, Ms. Smoak," Bryce says dryly as a greeting.

"If you're measuring popularity with bullets then… sure," she responds, deeply unamused.

"Apologies for the intrusion," Lance says, far more reasonably than Bryce. "We need to ask a couple of questions about what happened at the hospital earlier today. Is now a good time?"

"Pretty sure there's no such thing, but you can come in," Felicity says, placing a hand on Diggle's shoulder to prompt him to move.

He does, but he doesn't look happy about it.

"Roy calling Laurel?" Digg asks Lyla, noting the younger man's absence.

"And Oliver," Lyla confirms.

That's maybe not the best idea, Felicity recognizes, but she gets why Roy's doing it. Oliver would want to know. Still, she can't help but think that putting Oliver and Bryce in the same room is a bad idea at any time and it's borderline dangerous now. Bryce isn't dumb and the connections between them all are starting to become a lot less blurry.

"That's a very supportive boss you have, Ms. Smoak," Bryce remarks.

"I'll be sure to pass along the compliment," Felicity smiles tightly.

"We need to get your statement on what happened at the hospital today," Lance jumps in, trying to redirect the conversation.

"I'd invite you to make yourself at home while we wait for my lawyer, but… well… that might be a challenge at the moment," Felicity says, looking around the spartan space.
"Your recent change in living arrangements is... interesting," Bryce notes.

"If you say so. I'd have gone with annoying, but, hey, at least the commute to work is going to be fantastic," she responds flippantly.

"You know, you working for him actually clarifies a few things," Bryce tells her. "Like how you and Ms. Lance know each other.

"Still waiting for her before I talk to you," Felicity reminds him.

"This isn't about the Arrow. This is about the attack on you and the three men who died in it," Bryce informs her.

"Right. Those aren't related at all," she snorts, folding her arms in front of herself.

It's awkward after that. Or, well... more awkward. Felicity's trying not to talk, which is sort of an epic struggle considering she's her, and Bryce keeps baiting while Digg stands next to Felicity like the bodyguard he is and Lance just looks wildly uncomfortable. Luckily - and unsurprisingly - it's not long before there's a knock at the door.

Lyla checks the door this time and swings it open to reveal Oliver with Laurel Lance a half step behind him and off to the side. His whole frame fills the doorway, looming with intensity and obvious displeasure. Felicity would be lying if she said that didn't send a little thrill running through her.

"Major Bryce," Oliver says tightly. "It's been a long time."

"Not nearly long enough," Bryce responds in kind. "Though I'm not exactly sure why you're here."

"You're questioning my employee in my building who's under the protection of my company's security team. Why wouldn't I be here?" Oliver asks him, moving into the room and standing between the man and Felicity.

"Forgive me. I'd forgotten you were playing the part of an upstanding businessman these days," Bryce postures. "It's such a departure from years past."

"Yes, well, it's funny how having to fight to stay alive for years on end will change a person," Oliver tells him humorlessly.

"And yet, I find, that no matter what the circumstances, a man's base nature never changes," Bryce counters.

"Are you going to get to questioning my client anytime soon or should she and I head out while you boys catch up?" Laurel asks dryly.

"We'll get started just as soon as everyone unnecessary leaves and gives us the room," Bryce asserts.

"It's my building. I'm not going anywhere," Oliver grits out. "And, given recent events, our security personnel are completely necessary."

"You've got two cops in the room," Bryce deadpans.

"They're staying," Felicity asserts, sidestepping Oliver so she can see Bryce.

Bryce is gearing up to argue, that much is obvious, but Captain Lance steps.
"This is fine," Lance states. "Can you walk us through what happened at the hospital, Ms. Smoak?"

Felicity looks to Laurel, who nods at her, before she starts to answer.

"Lyla and I were leaving, heading through the parking garage when-"

"Why were you there in the first place?" Bryce interrupts.

"It's… Why does that matter?" Felicity asks warily.

"I don't know that it does," Bryce responds. "But it might."

"My client declines to answer the question," Laurel steps in. "Move on."

"Really?" Bryce asks, unimpressed. "You're putting your foot down on why you were there? We will find out anyhow, you know?"

"Then find out," Laurel shrugs. "She's uncomfortable answering and you can't compel her to speak about this, so move on."

"You were heading through the parking garage?" Bryce asks, turning back to Felicity.

"Yes," Felicity confirms. "I saw… something. I didn't know what it was. Lyla was the one who recognized a threat and she pushed me down behind a car. The gunshots starts almost immediately after that."

Oliver flinches next to her, hearing the story retold. His fingers move of their own accord like they're going to touch her, to rest along her elbow or splay across her back or something to remind himself that she's there and safe, but he stops himself, reigns it in. It's an odd gesture, ultimately, his abbreviated move toward her that ends with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Bryce almost certainly takes notice. A critical shake of Lance's head is proof enough that he saw it, too. Lovely.

"Did you see the shooters?" Lance asks.

"Not then," Felicity responds. "The car was in the way. Which, you know, I was pretty happy about at the time. On account of the bullets being shot at me."

"You saw them later, though?" Bryce questions.

"Yes. After Lyla shot them. She saved our lives. Two of the men were already dead and the third was hit but still trying to shoot us. Lyla returned fire and killed him. Then we escaped," Felicity explains.

"Did you know them?" Bryce asks.

"No."

"Why do you think they were after you?" Lance asks, to which Felicity raises an eyebrow in disbelief. "Humor me, Miss Smoak."

"I can only imagine it has something to do with the media coverage around me and the Arrow," Felicity replies. "I can't imagine I'm on the Triad's hit list for any other reason."

Felicity doesn't realize her error immediately, but she knows she's made one just from the way Oliver tenses more and Digg's stance firms up. It's a nerve-wracking moment waiting for Bryce to speak again.
"Now what would a nice girl like you know about Chinese organized crime?" Bryce asks, watching her like a bloodhound that's just caught the scent of its quarry.

"Don't answer that," Laurel says sharply.

Felicity nods uneasily in response.

"It's an incredibly valid question, given the circumstances," Bryce points out.

"Maybe," Laurel admits. "But you're treating my client like a criminal. She's not. Try to remember this is a woman who's had her life unexpectedly turned upside-down overnight and suddenly finds herself the target of some very dangerous people."

"Fine. I'll reword the question," Bryce acquiesces. "How did you know those men were with the Triad?"

"Would you believe Google?" She asks hopefully, absent a better explanation.

"Miss Smoak," Bryce says warningly.

"It was the only explanation that made sense," Felicity says finally. "They were speaking Mandarin and they were obviously experienced hitmen."

"And you were aware that the Hood has tangled with the Triad before," Bryce adds. "Weren't you?"

"Don't answer that," Laurel instructs firmly. "This has veered sharply away from supplying a statement about what happened at the hospital, Major Bryce."

"Not at all," he replies coolly. "This goes to motive. I can get a court order if you want to do this the hard way, but we both know I'll get these questions answered eventually."

"I'm inclined to tell you to get the damn court order, then," Laurel bristles. "I don't like my client being treated like this."

"I'm going to ask you again, Miss Smoak," Bryce says, pale eyes staring right into her, leaving her uneasy and nervous. "It's up to you if you want to do this the easy way or the hard way. A little cooperation goes a long way and it really would be nice if the press could be told you were cooperating fully."

"How dare you threaten my client with-" Laurel starts off, incensed on Felicity's behalf.

"How did you know that the Hood and the Triad are adversaries. It's not public knowledge. It hasn't been in the papers, so how did you know?" Bryce demands again, fully ignoring Laurel at this point.

"He told me," Felicity asserts boldly, her chin held high.

Oliver hisses through his teeth at that. It's quiet and low and probably the police officers can't hear it, but Felicity can and she knows, fully, that they are on exceedingly dangerous ground right now.

There's dead silence for a long beat before Bryce speaks again.

"He told you?"

"Yes."

"The Arrow did?"
"If that's what you want to call him… yes."

"And what do you call him?"

"None of your business."

"But he told you. About the Chinese mob. That's… some interesting pillow talk you two have got going on. If that's really all it is."

She can't even look at Oliver. For one, it would be far too telling, but for another, she knows her cheeks are flaming horribly at Bryce's words. She can, however, feel the tension radiating off of him in waves, feel the urge to reach over and clasp his hand in hers. She doesn't, obviously. For lots of reasons. But the impulse is there, strong and steady.

"So he warned you about the Triad. He's concerned about your safety, then," Bryce deduces. "Have you talked to him since last night?"

"Felicity, do not answer that," Laurel orders firmly.

"I wasn't going to," she replies.

"This interview is done," Laurel announces. "You can see yourselves out."

"For now," Bryce agrees, still watching Felicity with heavy suspicion.

"We'll need the gun, Ms. Michaels," Captain Lance tells Lyla, holding out his hand. "For evidence."

"Of course," Lyla says, handing over the sidearm.

"Thanks. We'll be in touch," Captain Lance says.

"Yippie," Felicity says without enthusiasm.

The door closes behind the two policemen a moment later and the tension goes with them. There are so many sighs of relief around the room that Felicity honestly couldn't tell you who they all came from.

"What was that?" Laurel demands, turning back from the door to face Felicity.

"Bryce was right," Felicity says. "They were going to compel me to give answers one way or another. They're already convinced I'm sleeping with the Arrow and nothing I can do or say will change their minds. Maybe this way, at least, I can keep them from thinking I'm working with him, too. Because, honestly, can you think of another reason I would have known those men were Triad?"

"I don't like Bryce focusing on you," Oliver tells her, finally letting his hands free from his pockets and allowing one to settle against the curve of her elbow.

"You are… not alone in that," she replies, glancing at him.

"This is ridiculous," Laurel declares. "What the hell happened in the last two hours that we went from you two planning to completely avoid each other to Felicity moving into the building, you making statements about her to the press and her confessing having conversations with the Arrow to the police? Are you trying to sabotage all of us, Oliver?"

"I told you before that her safety was my top priority, Laurel," Oliver tells her confrontationally.
"You want to know what's changed? Not that."

"You know what?" Felicity pipes up, interrupting Oliver and Laurel's spat before it even really begins. "I'm done with today. This day? Officially over in Felicity-land. I'm finished with it. If you guys want to argue, you can go down to the office and do it. Me? I'm going to stay here. I'm going to unpack and eat something smothered in marinara. And I'm going to Lysol that bed because who knows who used it last. Then I'm going to marathon Battlestar Galactica on Netflix for at least a season's worth because even if he doesn't have a salmon ladder, Lee Adama's arms make everything in life a little happier and I deserve that right now. This is my plan. Because I'm just done. Okay?"

Oliver's face does a funny thing when she mentions Lee Adama's arms, but he doesn't say anything about it. He doesn't say anything at all, in fact. He just nods.

"You got it," Digg tells her with a thin smile.

"We'll talk tomorrow," Laurel tells her.

Yeah. She has no doubt of that. She nods in reply.

"I'll be in the building if you need… anything," Oliver finally says, looking a little awkward as he speaks. "I'm working late."

"Oliver, it's Saturday," she reminds him, rolling her eyes. "You don't even work after five on weekdays."

"I want to be nearby in case… I don't know. Just in case," he tells her. "There's eight apartments on this floor. I'm taking one next to you. Sara's going to be staying in the one on the other side."

"This is literally the safest place outside of Fort Knox," she replies. "Don't you think that's just a little excessive."

"It's your safety, Felicity," he implores. "Just… humor me. Please. I'll be right next door if you need anything."

She pauses and watches him for a moment, weighing the anxiety in his features and the tension in his body, before she nods.

"Yeah, okay," she finally says. "But you're more likely to need something from me than I am from you. For your bed, I mean."

He blinks rapidly at that and stares at her dumbfoundedly. And… yeah… she's got such a way of making unintentionally suggestive comments, doesn't she?

"...by which I meant Lysol," she clarifies, biting her lip. "But, yeah, that comment just totally fits with my day, doesn't it?"

He laughs at that, light and short, and kisses her forehead with gentle affection. It's as innocent an expression as possible, but her eyes still drift shut at the touch of his lips on her skin as she savors the feeling of rightness that floods through her. It is warmth and comfort and home and she wants to curl into him and not let him go, feel his skin against hers and his lips on her face and his heartbeat thrum in his chest under her fingertips. She can't though. She can't. But she holds on to the little sliver of perfect as long as she can.

"It'll be better tomorrow. Enjoy your marathon," he tells her, his lips still brushing against her skin as he speaks. "I'll see you in the morning."
As Felicity wakes up on Sunday morning she realizes something exceptionally important. Though Lyla had been very helpful in grabbing a great many things from her apartment for her, she had not, in fact, brought a coffee maker.

This is a Problem. With a capital P. She doesn't say this lightly, either. Generally, Capital P Problems are things like finding out that she's wearing a bomb as a necklace or discovering that her wifi has gone down. But, really, lack of coffee falls only slightly beneath those things in her book.

It's with tremendous gogginess that she drags herself out of bed and fumbles through the closet for clothes. Her mission, clearly, is caffeine. And while she knows it's only thirty-seven floors down and a block away and that two days ago she would have just thrown on her M.I.T. sweatshirt and some yoga pants before heading out, she's also aware that today she runs the risk of ending up on the cover of People magazine the second she steps outside. So, she puts forth more effort. Which is annoying. Because it's Sunday. Oliver's promise that today would be better has, so far, not panned out. But then, it would be difficult for it to be worse. So, that's something anyhow.

Oh, crap. She really hopes she didn't just jinx things.

Being dressed nicely feels like armor in some ways, but it still doesn't protect her. Not really. And while she might not like the new reality she's living in, she's also fully aware of what it means. So, she's not about to go on a coffee run by herself.

She doesn't know which side of her temporary apartment Oliver is staying at and which side is Sara's, but it ultimately doesn't matter. She picks one and knocks on the door. If she's a little disappointed when Sara answers instead of Oliver, she hopes she hides it well.

"Well don't you just look like a Hollywood starlet this morning?" Sara asks with a smirk by way of greeting.

"I miss my Captain Planet pyjamas," Felicity confesses perching absurdly oversized sunglasses atop her head. "But I need coffee and after yesterday…"

"Yeah, I get it," Sara says. "Gimmie five and we'll head over to Java Lounge so you can get your fix, k?"

"You're a saint," Felicity breathes, which earns a raised eyebrow and disbelieving stare from Sara. "Well… not actually. Obviously. Because, I mean, you are an assassin and I'm pretty sure that's not considered saintly. But, you know what? Forget it. I'm just grateful is all. My brain doesn't function before coffee."

"It's cool," Sara laughs, unbothered by Felicity's fumbling.

Sara's ready quickly, as promised, and the two head out in search of the largest lattes they can find with little delay. Sara takes them out of the building through the parking garage, even though they're walking, and mercifully there's no media who takes note of them. But the route itself is telling. Felicity's pretty sure this means the media is fully aware of where she's living these days.

The coffee, when she gets it, settles her some and brings with it some alertness and sense of normalcy. She's getting a few curious looks from other patrons, from the barista, but no one says anything and no one has whipped out their cellphones to take a picture, so Felicity takes that as the win that it is. In fact, things are looking pretty great, comparatively, right up until they start heading
back to QC.

They'd passed a newsstand on the way to the coffee shop, but Felicity hadn't really noted it then. This time, though... this time it stops her dead in her tracks.

Her face is everywhere.

And - really - shouldn't people be more concerned about things like melting icecaps and pay inequality and child soldiers? Why is this the story? Who the hell cares about her supposed sex life?

"Don't let it bother you," Sara advises, following Felicity's gaze.

"Right. Sure. Any advice on how to achieve that?" Felicity asks dryly. "And, oh my god, seriously?"

She grabs the worst of the tabloids - the National Enquirer - and picks it up, showing the front page to Sara.

*Arrow and Batman showdown over Starling City Sweetheart - who's the baby daddy?*

There are photos. Grainy ones of the Hood fighting *someone* wearing dark clothes and another of Batman jumping off of a building with a blonde woman in his arms. There's also a shot of her in the corner in a little circle with an arrow pointed at her midsection. Felicity makes a mental note to watch her posture for like *forever*. Because, seriously, *what?*

"At least they called you a sweetheart?" Sara asks laughingly. "Come on, you know this is trash. *Everyone* knows this is trash."

"I just... *ugh*. Can we just get back, please?" Felicity asks, tossing the rag back atop its pile of identical pieces of refuse masquerading as news.

They make it back without incident and find Oliver standing outside her door, knocking and looking concerned at the lack of an answer.

"Hey, there you are," he says with relief as she and Sara walk up.

"Do I look fat?" She asks with no preamble.

Oliver freezes. Because this question is a trap. Always. There is no right answer.

"What? No. Of course not," he says almost immediately, because hesitation on any response to this question is the worst idea ever.

"You'd tell me right?" She asks, glaring a little.

Oliver can't quite figure out how this conversation has come about, but he's clearly eight kinds of uncomfortable with it.

"I can't lie to you," he responds. "You know that. What's this about?"

"Tabloids," Sara says, looking like she's relishing this conversation entirely too much.

"The National Enquirer thinks I'm pregnant either with your baby or Batman's," Felicity expounds.

Oliver's eyes go wide and his jaw slackens a little as he looks her up and down, his eyes lingering on her midsection. She can't quite interpret what the look on his face is saying, but she can see his tongue between his teeth and there's an intensity in his gaze that makes her shiver.
It's Sara snorting that breaks the moment.

"I… wasn't aware you knew Batman," he says finally, his voice all kinds of gritty and doing really delicious things to her insides.

"I don't. I'm a one-vigilante kind of girl," she responds, going for flippant and failing dramatically. Her words do nothing to water down the intensity of his gaze.

"Huh… I should probably call Nyssa, now that I'm thinking about it," Sara muses. "Make it really clear those tabloids are full of crap before we have a whole new level of problems on our hands."

"What?" Felicity blinks, her attention dragging back toward Sara. "Does Nyssa know Batman?"

"Not… exactly," Sara drawls. "But her sister Talia knows him really well. It's complicated. They're… complicated. I'd prefer you stay off of her radar. Talia is… difficult."

"That sounds like the understatement to end all understatements," Felicity says.

"It sort of is," Sara admits. "I think Nyssa got all the sanity genes in that family."

Yeah. That's not at all terrifying.

"Call her," Oliver says.

It's more of a command than a request, but Sara doesn't argue. She nods before jerking her head toward the door of her temporary home.

"I'll go do that. You got her?" Sara asks, obviously referring to Felicity.

"I don't need a babysitter," Felicity bristles. "I'm in QC. I'm fine."

"I got her," Oliver assures Sara, totally ignoring Felicity's objections, to her great displeasure.

"I don't need you to protect me constantly, Oliver," Felicity says as Sara leaves. Oliver opens his mouth to answer, but he never quite gets there because he's distracted by the ding of the elevator arriving on their floor. Digg walks out a moment later, but he's not alone. Oliver's brow furrows as he doesn't recognize the two women with him but Felicity blanches and looks sort of like she'd like to turn invisible.

"Oh shit," Felicity says quietly. "I lied. Protect me. Hide me. You're big. Maybe if I just stand behind you they won't see me."

"I think it's too late for that," Oliver tells her with a smile in his voice, but still a little on edge because he has no idea who these women are.

Still… he trusts Digg and Felicity seems more skittish than scared, so that's reassuring.

"I found these lovely ladies in the lobby arguing with Bruce about getting up here. I recognized them from the photos Lyla brought over from Felicity's place. Figured I'd give them a lift," Digg says with a delighted smile.

"Filly! Oh my sweet baby girl, come give us a hug!" Demands the older of the two women.
"Filly? Oliver mouths toward Digg, who looks like he's doing his very best to keep from laughing, but is still failing miserably.

"Oh, look at my baby. So beautiful. Oh, fame looks good on you, honey," says the younger of the two.

"Gram... Mom... You're here. What are you doing here?" Felicity asks tensely as the two older women close in on her and hug her fiercely.

"Well you weren't answering your phone," Felicity's mother answers as though this makes it perfectly reasonable that she's flown in from out of state to show up on her temporary doorstep in five inch heels and a dress better suited for clubbing on a woman half her age. "Really, Felicity. You couldn't pick up and talk to your favorite mother after becoming famous?"

"I'm pretty sure the word you're looking for is infamous and I turned my ringer off because somehow the media got my phone number. I'm blaming my college roommate. Jenny never quite forgave me for spilling coffee on her homework sophomore year. This feels like something she'd do," Felicity decides.

"Oh tosh," her grandmother says dismissively, too many bracelets on her wrist jangling with the gesture she makes of brushing things off. "Who cares about all that? Darling, we're so happy for you."

"Wait. What?" Felicity asks, her eyes bugging out. "You're happy for me that I'm the butt of every joke on late night television right now? Really?"

"That's all just window dressing," Felicity's mother says, as if none of the drama of the last twenty-four hours really matters even a little.

"You're living, my sweet girl," Felicity's gram says, pressing her palms against both sides of Felicity's face. "I always knew you were destined for a great story. And this, my dear, is it."

"Yeah, because all of my achievements before managing to kiss the Arrow in front of a camera were totally not important at all," Felicity counters with sarcasm.

"Now don't be like that," her mother admonishes with a tone that only a mother can manage. "That's not what we're saying at all. You've always reached for the stars, Felicity, and I've always been proud of you for doing everything you've set your mind to accomplish. But life is more than just academic and professional achievement. It's good to see you live a little. Everyone deserves a great romance."

"And that's what you think this is?" Felicity asks, ignoring the burning of her cheeks.

"Darling, if it's not, you need to work on that because that vigilante of yours is absolutely delicious. I have never seen leather look so good on anyone. Everyone at the retirement center agrees with me," Felicity's grandmother says. "If I were your age still I'd be climbing that man like a tree."

Oliver makes a horrible noise somewhere between a choke and a laugh and Felicity kind of thinks she might just melt into the floor. If that's a thing she could do right now she'd actually be grateful. Seriously.

"You haven't even seen his face!" Felicity argues, wondering why the hell she's even letting this line of conversation continue at all because it's a terrible idea.

"We've seen his arms," Felicity's mom says with raised eyebrows.
"And his jawline," her grandmother points out. "No man with a jawline like that is unattractive. That's just a fact. Reminds me of Dean Martin back in the day. And let me tell you, that man was easily one of the best lovers I ever had."

"Oh my god, Gram," is all Felicity can say.

"It seems like you've done a tremendous job of surrounding yourself with absolutely delicious men, actually," her grandmother continues, looking from Oliver and back toward Digg. "Good for you, Filly."

"Is it possible to die of embarrassment? I'm pretty sure I'm dying of embarrassment right now," Felicity says.

"Oh darling, don't be so dramatic," her mother says in what has to be the most unintentionally ironic statement ever.

"I'm Edith Smoak," says Felicity's grandmother, batting her eyelashes in a way that looks horribly unsettling on a woman of nearly eighty as she extends her hand to Oliver. "I'm an aquarius, single and delighted to meet you."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Smoak. I'm Oliver Queen. Welcome to Starling City," Oliver says with amusement, taking her hand gently and kissing her fingers gallantly.

"My aren't you the charmer," Felicity's mom says coquettishly as Felicity rests her forehead against the palms of her hands.

She's never going to hear the end of this. From any of them.

"Oliver's my boss, Mom," Felicity says pointedly.

"Well, lucky you then," her mother responds with a wink before reaching out to shake Oliver's hand herself "Donna Smoak. It's wonderful to meet you, Mr. Queen."

"Please. Call me Oliver," he responds.

Her mother's breathy giggle combined with her grandmother's hum of approval is possibly the worst sound Felicity has ever heard.

"Of course," Donna says, blinking in a way that she must seem to think girlish or attractive or something.

"Do you have an eyelash in your eye or something?" Felicity asks her mom.

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous," she responds looking a little affronted before turning her whole attention back to Oliver. "I do need to thank you, Oliver, for taking such good care of my girl. There's not many bosses that would be considerate enough to provide her a place to stay while this little thing with the media calms down."

"I have some experience with how difficult the media can be," Oliver says with a smile that falls somewhere between genuine and public persona.

"Of course you do… Of course you do…" Edith Smoak says, patting him repeatedly on the arm.

Felicity's pretty sure her grandmother is just copping a feel from the get-go, but then she sees her grandmother's hand squeeze a little and oh my God Felicity sort of wishes she had been adopted. It's
probably too late for that, though. Is it too late for that? Maybe Digg could adopt her. He and Lyla are going to be great parents. She's sure of this. They could practice on her. And they're practically family already anyhow. Plus she's like 95% sure neither one of them will ever intentionally feel up Oliver. That's a big upside at this point.

"You should make sure your lover is aware Oliver's just being an exceptional boss," Felicity's mother tells her.

Felicity blanches and nearly chokes on her own tongue as she tries to respond. Because, first of all, she had hoped to go her whole life without hearing her mother utter the words 'your lover' and secondly because Oliver is like right there and oh my God the ways in which this morning sucks have just continually compounded exponentially.

"What?" She finally manages in something that more closely resembles a squeak than a word.

"Well, think about it, darling," Donna says with broad gestures and entirely more hip action than is required for any conversation ever. "If he doesn't know better this might look… you know… intimate. And maybe it is. What do I know? I'm not judging, honey. But your Arrow already has quite the history of aiming for this city's ultra-rich and if he's the jealous sort…"

"Mom… no. Just… God… no," Felicity sputters, actively ignoring the way Oliver is looking at her. Because she can't. The implications are there on like every level and she just can't. She has limits. Apparently her mother insinuating that she's cheating on the Arrow with Oliver is one of them.

"He's not the jealous sort?" Her grandmother asks disbelievingly with an eyebrow raised.

She tries to answer but the words won't come out because she can't lie to her mother and grandmother. She just can't. And, well… he kind of is the jealous sort, isn't he? Just look at the whole Barry thing.

"There's… he… knows," she finally manages with great levels of discomfort. "Oliver's not... a threat to the Arrow. He… knows that."

From off to the side, Digg snorts. Felicity shoots him a murderous glare in response, but he just shakes his head. If she were looking at this all more objectively, she might be snorting and shaking her head along with him.

They're all sort of simultaneously saved and damned when the elevator dings and Pamela stalks out. On one hand, the head of the Queen Consolidated public relations department's very presence can draw attention away from even the most extreme circumstances - like the Smoak matriarchs doggedly questioning Felicity about her love life. On the other hand, she looks pissed off about something and Felicity's pretty sure she doesn't want to know what.

"Oliver Jonas Queen," Pamela says, closing in on her boss until she's damn near toe-to-toe with him with her hands on her ample hips.

Oliver is watching her warily like he can't quite figure out what he did that deserves middle name use and it's kind of funny watching him slip from his thin businessman persona into something more genuine in spite of himself. Or it would be funny if, you know, the situation was totally different. As it is, Oliver isn't the only one in the hall who's a little anxious.

"...Good morning, Pamela?" He asks finally after a moment.

"It could have been a good morning, Oliver. It could have," she tells him. "Do you know why it's
"I'm going to guess it has something to do with you being at work on a Sunday morning, but beyond that I'm afraid you're going to have to clue me in," Oliver tells her.

"It's not a good morning because when I asked you yesterday if there was anything else I needed to know, you neglected to tell me that you'd donated fifty million dollars to charity because your assistant asked you to!" Pamela says, which leads to a great gasp from both of the older Smoak women.

"That was anonymous, Pamela," Oliver counters unhappily.

"Not anymore," Pamela tells him with totally characteristic amounts of bluntness.

"Fifty million dollars? My stars!" Edith exclaims, fanning herself with her hand.

"Honey, I think you'd better have a talk with your vigilante," Donna Smoak says, laying a hand on her daughter's arm.

Felicity laughs and looks to the ceiling because... well... her mother isn't wrong exactly, but she's not right exactly either. And the words 'your vigilante' are apparently right up there with 'your lover' on the list of phrases she never wanted to hear out of her mother's mouth.

Because they sound the same.

And what the hell does she do with that?

"Do you know what most people daydream about, Oliver?" Pamela asks him.

Oliver freezes and his eyes dart toward Felicity briefly. It's almost subtle, barely noticeable, but the look on Pamela's face is proof enough she caught it. Pamela doesn't miss much. It might be a problem.

"Do you?" Pamela asks.

"Things they can't have," Oliver responds in a way that physically hurts Felicity's heart to hear.

"Right. Yes," Pamela says, ignoring or missing his tone. "Do you know what I daydream about, Oliver? Controlling the damned news cycle because these days the media knows what's going on inside this company before I do!"

"The media wasn't supposed to know and neither were you," Oliver points out.

"Oliver... you gave an eight-figure donation to an underfunded local hospital and you focused on the pediatrics wing," Pamela laughs with a chuckle that really is frustration instead of humor. "Do you even get what a dream story that would be for me? For QC? Why the hell would you want to keep that quiet?"

"Because it's not about me," Oliver tells her firmly. "Or QC. It's about helping innocent people who need it, who my mother hurt. I don't need recognition for that. I don't even want it."

"So humble, too," Donna Smoak sighs adoringly as Felicity winces.

"I can't believe the hospital leaked the donation," Oliver says, shaking his head.

"Oh they didn't leak it," Pamela replies matter-of-factly.
"What? Who did?" Oliver asks bewildered.

"Some kid at the store where Ms. Smoak bought the e-readers blabbed to the press, looking to get himself on television. He said she was sending them to Batman, but the media figured out pretty quickly that they went to the hospital," Pamela tells him. "Some reporters went over to interview a few of the families. I guess one of them wasn't being particularly kind in referencing Ms. Smoak and the brother of a patient got baited into defending her, let slip about the donation."

Felicity realizes what this means a split-second before Oliver does and she literally watches as realization dawns on his face. There's only one person outside of Team Arrow, the hospital donation coordinator and, presumably, whoever manages Oliver's money that could have known about the donation.

Her kidnapper.

Oliver knows beyond the shadow of a doubt who he is. Or he will, as soon as he checks any media site. And whether he was well-intentioned or not, Marcus Harrier had held her at gunpoint and thrown her in the back of his car. And Oliver had seen that surveillance footage.

The darkening look on Oliver's face shows he clearly hasn't forgotten that little fact.

"Oliver… no," Felicity says warningly, earning a somewhat surprised look from all of the other women in the hall.

He doesn't say anything in reply, offering instead a tense, burning look in response. It's not the answer she wanted.

"I'm sure he didn't… mean anything by it," Felicity says, feeling like she's speaking in code because she sort of is. "You showing up to give him a hard time would just scare him… You being, you know, you and all."

"I'm not sure that's such a bad idea," Oliver responds tightly.

"Oliver!" She says firmly.

"Felicity!" He responds in the same tone, a tacit challenge.

"Mom… Gram, can you just… wait in my room for a bit? I need to talk to Oliver. Alone," Felicity says, opening her door.

"Oh my, would you look at that view! Isn't that just something!" Edith Smoak gasps, disappearing into Felicity's room with Donna close behind.

"Pamela…" Felicity starts, hesitating because honestly she's always a little unsure of how to deal with this woman.

"I have several hundred phone calls to return and one hell of a statement to draft," Pamela tells her. "You two get your shit together, then come see me. My office this time, Oliver. This isn't a pissing contest over turf. We'll need the media records."

"We'll be there," Felicity promises.

Apparently Pamela decides her word is good on both her behalf and on Oliver's because she just nods sharply before turning and making her way back to the elevator.
"You kickin' me out, too?" Digg asks with a raised eyebrow. "Cause I can't quite decide if I really want to be here for this or if I really don't."

"That depends. Are you going to be the voice of reason or are you going to side with Oliver?" Felicity asks curiously.

"Very funny," Oliver deadpans.

"Thanks!" Felicity says with more brightness than is strictly warranted.

"Come on," Digg tells them, leading the way into Oliver's temporary quarters.

Felicity's eyes linger on Sara's door for a moment, half wishing the other woman had come out and joined the conversation but also half glad she hadn't. Sara might be a very reasonable person but she was also likely to find all of this absolutely hilarious. Felicity isn't quite finding the funny in this situation. Not right now, anyhow.

"You're going to leave Marcus alone," Felicity announces as she follows her boys into Oliver's room and shuts the door.

"Marcus?" Oliver questions.

"The Hound," Felicity elaborates.

Oliver's face doesn't look any less perplexed and she realizes they'd never really talked details about her kidnapping. Their mouths had been sort of engaged in other ways... And now is really not the time for a flashback moment, is it?

"That's a truly terrible name," Digg says with a wince.

"Yeah, well... go easy on him. He's new at this villain thing," Felicity responds glibly.

The look on Oliver's face says he isn't at all placated by her words. Which is fair, really.

"I mean, he's not even a villain," she explains. "Not really. It was more like a... one-time really bad extracurricular idea? That's a bad description. It's just... He's a kid, Oliver. And he was scared and desperate and so uncomfortable and he'll never do it again. I swear. He's not the Count or the Dollmaker or the Clock King. You don't need to avenge me. There's nothing that needs avenging. No need to assemble."

"I don't like letting someone, letting anyone, get away with treating you like that, Felicity," he growls. "You're off-limits. And this... kid doesn't even get a warning?"

"What happens if you do?" She counters, ignoring the way Digg is standing back, eyes ping-ponging between them. "Let's say the Arrow goes and pretends he's going to use him for archery practice. What conclusion would Marcus come to?"

Oliver's brow furrows because he is so zoned into his train of thoughts that he just can't seem to see where her's are veering.

"He'd know you're the Arrow, Oliver," Felicity explains. "There's no way he wouldn't. You're the one out fifty million dollars. Your assistant is the one he kidnapped. You're the one who would have reason to hold a grudge. And if he figures it out, then what?"

"She's right, man," Digg speaks up.
Oliver clenches a fist in frustration and turns away from them. There's no winning when he's up against both of them. He knows that.

"If you think about it, you already know that," Digg adds. "But we've got his name, know his face. We can keep an eye on him, make sure Felicity's right that he's not gonna pull anything like this again."

"I'll add him to the trackers the next time I'm back in the lair," Felicity agrees readily.

Oliver nods, though he's still obviously unhappy about the way this entire conversation has gone.

"We good?" Felicity asks, tilting her head and trying to catch his eye.

"Yeah," Oliver says, not quite looking at her.

"Really? Cause… right now it seems like you think that blank gray wall is super interesting and, I've got to be honest, it's really not," Felicity responds warily.

"We're fine," Oliver says, finally looking at her, tight-lipped and grim-faced.

It's not her favorite look on him, but it's better than him staring at the wall and she'll take it.

"Good," she says, apparently convinced. "Then, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go deal with the next crisis on my list. My mom and my gram. If they're in my room with their ears pressed to the wall, we might have to borrow some sort of mind-erasing device from ARGUS or something."

"That's not actually a thing, Felicity," Digg tells her.

"That's what Waller wants you to think," she responds loftily, moving toward the door. "They're completely Men In Black. If they don't have neuralyzer, I'm actually a little disappointed in them."

"I… actually got that reference," Oliver says with surprise as Felicity leaves the room.

"Not sure that being aware of twenty-year old pop culture references is much of a triumph, but I suppose congratulations anyhow," Digg tells him with mild amusement.

Oliver raises his eyebrows in tacit agreement as his stuffs his hands in his pockets and turns to stare out at the cityscape outside the window. He can see everything from here. The Glades. The financial district. The docks. If he looks closely enough he likes to think he can see Verdant. He knows he can see Felicity's apartment. He sees everything he's sworn to protect. Except… the most important things, the most important people are right here under his roof.

He might be doing right by the city, but he feels like he's failing them. If he can't even prevent her from being kidnapped by an amateur, if he can't even retaliate in her name, what good is he?

"We have another resource we aren't using," Oliver says in an exhale.

"I was wondering when you'd bring that up," Digg replies.

"Yeah…" Oliver responds, his mind a million miles away.

"It's a bad idea, man," Digg tells him. "Maybe before, but now?"

"Yeah," Oliver agrees, sounding less than convinced.

"You call them in and this goes bad. You know that," Digg presses.
Oliver turns to look at him, clearly needing to hear what Digg is saying but not really wanting to anyhow.

"You'll start a mob war, Oliver," Digg adds. "You get the Bratva protecting her and the Triad gunning for her… you know how that ends. They call it friendly fire for a reason. She'd be in more danger, not less. And so would the rest of the city."

If it was just about the city, he'd be far less convinced, which is a rather jarring realization. But it's not. And Digg is right. Digg is usually right. The last thing they need on top of everything going on right now is a mob war. And he doesn't want Felicity in the middle of that.

"I just wish I could do more," Oliver confides.

"You're doing plenty," Digg responds. "And she knows it. You just can't solve everything and that doesn't sit well with you. I wish I could, too. But I can't. That doesn't sit well with me either, but that's how it is. You're not failing her, man. You're there for her, helping her through this in every way you can. She knows that."

"It's not enough," Oliver says.

"To her it is," Digg says pointedly, in a way that indicates they're now having this conversation on multiple levels. "So, maybe that's something you two ought to talk about."

Oliver grimaces and tries not to remember that Digg is usually right.
The meeting with Pamela turns out to be exactly as awkward and uncomfortable as Oliver expected. She has a lot of probing questions that he doesn’t want to answer and it’s ten times worse with Felicity at his side.

They skirt the truth a lot with Pamela. She knows it, too. Undoubtedly. But she also seems more concerned with helping them to create plausible answers to everything than she is with figuring out the truth. And they manage to get out of her office with their secrets mostly intact.

That, he supposes, is the difference between reporters and public relations directors.

Both jobs seem exhausting to him. And this is coming from a guy running a global corporation by day and cleaning up the city by night.

But both the media and their corporate counterpart seem to be getting uncomfortably close to the truth. They know Oliver gave $50 million of his own money to charity because Felicity asked him to. They know, the same day, she was caught on camera kissing the Arrow. People are starting to remember that he was once accused of being the vigilante. And they’re starting to question if he really should have been cleared of suspicion.

He’s walking a very dangerous line.

What Oliver does next after leaving Pamela's office is risky, questionable, and surely should have been done at night. But he does it anyhow. And he does it at lunchtime on a Sunday. He has no doubt that Digg and Felicity will give him hell when they find out.

Tracking down Debbie Elliot is easy. The reporter probably went home at some point during the night, but she's back outside QC again now. Her too-tanned skin and Barbie-esque frame in a too-tight suit with too-flashy jewelry stands out starkly against the lazy Sunday morning foot traffic outside the building.

She’s not the only reporter there. He can see a few more, more than yesterday - probably because they actually had some success in talking to him - but she's conveniently positioned a little further away from the others. Near an alleyway.

It's nearly perfect.

He drops down into the alley from the rooftop of a nearby building. They don't see him immediately, the reporter and her cameraman. He fixes that though. Decisively. With an arrow to the camera.

The pair startle and turn swiftly toward him, some mixture of surprise, fear and excitement scrawled across their faces. Okay, so the fear is mostly the cameraman. He's frozen in place like he's terrified that if he so much as twitches he'll end up with an arrow in him. Debbie Elliot has far less sense, apparently.

"Oh my god," the reporter breathes, looking like Christmas just came early. "Oh my god. You're here. Oh why did you shoot the camera? I have so many-" 

"I'm not a fan of cameras," Oliver growls, voice modulator most definitely on and his hood pulled
low as he stays carefully in the shadows of the building.

"Fine. Okay. I can… work with that. Mr. Hood, the residents of Starling City would like to know how-"

"I'm not here to answer your questions," he interrupts.

"Why are you here then?" She asks.

"To tell you you're asking the wrong questions. All of you are," he responds.

"Then what are the right questions?" She asks curiously.

It's possibly the best question he's heard any reporter ask ever. And he's heard a lot of them over the years.

"What this city needs. How we can save it. What we need to do to bring the corrupt to their knees and make our streets safe. That's what's important," he tells her.


"Not all curiosities need to be satisfied. I'm far less important than what you seem to think I am," he says.

"And Felicity Smoak?" The reporter prods.

He hesitates, which says more in and of itself than he would like.

"She's every bit as important as you think, but not for the reasons you think," he says finally.

"What does that mean?" Debbie presses.

"It means she's a brilliant woman who cares about this city and has a drive to help those who need it," he replies.

"You're talking about the donation," the reporter muses.

"In part," he agrees.

"What about Oliver Queen?" Debbie prods.

"I'm not here to talk about Oliver Queen," he growls in response, distaste at his own name incredibly evident.

"There's talk they may be involved," the reporter informs him, as if this might be news or newsworthy.

"That would be their business. Not mine," he says succinctly.

"And yet those pictures of you and her make it seem very much like it would be your business," Debbie counters.

"That's not the story here," he says bluntly.

"Are you in love with her?" The reporter asks curiously.
"My life doesn't have room for things like that," he responds. "Relationships… personal attachments. They don't fit with what I do. I forgot that for a moment and look what's happened since. She doesn't deserve what's happening to her now. And it's my fault."

"You seem to blame yourself for a lot, feel a heavy sense of responsibility. Why is that, Mr. Arrow?" The reporter asks. "Or is that not the story either?"

"It is," he acknowledges. "But it's not one I'm going to tell you."

"Does Felicity Smoak know who you really are?" Debbie presses.

"I am the Arrow. I am my mission. I'm the one who makes our city better by holding those accountable who fail it. She knows that," he replies. "That's who I am. That's all I can be."

"That's not an easy way to live," the reporter tells him.

"There's a difference between what's right and what's easy," he responds.

"Did you just… paraphrase Harry Potter?" Debbie asks with a startled laugh.

Oliver blinks a few times at that, surprised at the question. His mind drifts back to years ago for just an instant. Thea is ten and so incredibly excited that he can't say no when she begs him to take her to the new Harry Potter movie. He's never been able to say 'no' to Thea. He's not that thrilled with the movie because he's nineteen and there aren't even any hot girls in it other than that French chick, but Thea chatters on about the movie for weeks after the fact. Apparently some of it sticks with him.

It always surprises him when bits of Oliver Queen seep through the cracks of his Arrow gear and worm their way inside.

"Maybe," he allows after a beat.

"So you have time for Harry Potter but not for personal attachments?" Debbie digs.

"I wasn't always the Arrow," he tells her.

"Now, see… there's a story," Debbie tells him.

"Not today it's not," he counters.

The sun is shifting and he's losing the shade of the building, which makes him uneasy. It doesn't help that Debbie is proving a better reporter than he'd expected. She's too insightful, too curious, and he doesn't want to lose the upper hand. He shoots an arrow with a steel rope attached up at the roof of the building next to him and makes his escape without another word, even as Debbie shouts questions after him.

All-in-all, he feels like that went pretty well. At least this is one interview Pamela can't get mad at him for giving without her okay. Still, he knows Felicity and Digg and probably Laurel will have things to say about it. He's not looking forward to that.

"Sometimes I think you have a death wish," Digg says in greeting as Oliver makes his way into the lair, dressed back in his street clothes.

Oliver hesitates as he descends the stairs, thinking for a moment that Debbie's story has somehow hit
the airwaves in the last twenty minutes since he spoke to her. But then Digg points at Felicity's computers and Oliver winces knowing she's now going to give him hell for two very different and well-deserved reasons.

"What the hell did you do to Fletch, man?" Digg asks.

"It wouldn't stop beeping. And can we please stop calling the computer by a name, it's creepy," Oliver says.

"You can take that up with Felicity," Digg tells him. "And you will need to in the very near future."

"She's coming in?" He asks surprised.

"Hell yes she's coming in," Digg says with annoyance. "Because we need someone to fix the computer so we can track the Triad's movement but somebody decided to treat it like his own personal training dummy."

"Did you try plugging it back in?" Oliver asks. "All I did was yank some cords."

"You yanking cords is like the Hulk picking dandelions, then," Digg tells him.

He flips the switch to the computer on and the whole thing sounds horribly like a jet engine taking off and nothing displays on the screen. Yeah… this is… not good.

"Oh my god, what happened?" Felicity asks in horror from the top of the stairs, Roy standing next to her looking like he's entirely too amused given the situation.

"Oliver had a temper tantrum," Digg informs her.

"I did not," Oliver says in a voice that more closely approaches a whine than anything else.

"I'd go with temporary insanity, if I were you," Roy confides.

"Oh my poor baby, what did daddy do to you!" Felicity exclaims, petting the computer after hurrying down the stairs to its side.

Oliver blinks a lot because that line just… yeah. That's not… his brain can't go there. Felicity seems totally unbothered by it, though, in spite of the sheer amusement on Digg's face and the snort from Roy.

"Corporal punishment is not an appropriate discipline method, Oliver," she tells him, turning the computer off and removing its casing. "It's completely ineffective. I can't believe we're having this conversation. Fletch did not deserve this."

"Blondie, I'm not sure I ever wanted to know your stance on spanking," Roy tells her.

"I am increasingly uncomfortable with this conversation," Oliver says unevenly, glaring daggers at Roy.

Digg's laughter and Roy's smirk are exactly what Oliver expected, but Felicity is too wrapped up in the computer to respond to him directly. That's okay. That's more than okay.

The ring of a cell phone breaks through the sound of Digg's laughter and Felicity's mutterings to herself. It's Digg's and he answers it swiftly.

"Hey, what's… Really?" Digg asks, his whole countenance shifting to something nervous and
excited. "Now? Yeah I'm.. yeah. I'll be right there."

Oliver doesn't even have to ask to know what's going on and the sense of urgency in Digg's voice is enough to drag even Felicity's attention away from the computer.

"Lyla?" Oliver asks unnecessarily.

"Yeah. Apparently it's baby time," Digg says with a huge smile. "You'll need to call Waller. Get some security for-

"I'm on it," Oliver assures him. "Roy and Sara and I will make sure Felicity is protected. Stop worrying about us and go let Lyla break your hand while she's in labor."

"It's Lyla. She might break more than his hand," Roy points out.

"She might," Digg laughs, looking far more delighted about the prospect of broken bones than anyone should ever.

Felicity stands up from the computer and tugs Digg into a tight, swift hug and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

"Congratulations preemptively," Felicity tells him. "Give Lyla our love and let us know the minute there's a new Diggle in the world because media or not I'm absolutely going to be at that hospital to welcome that baby girl into the world. Okay?"

"You've got it," Digg assures her, returning the hug before clapping both Roy and Oliver on the shoulder and making his way out of the lair to the sunny streets above.

"I'm gonna go be… not here, too," Roy tells them, his hands stuffed casually in his pockets. "Do a sweep around the block, just in case. Be somewhere I'm not here watching you two stare weirdly at each other."

"Roy," Oliver says warningly as Felicity's cheeks flush.

"I'm going. I'm going," Roy says, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "Call me if she needs a bodyguard when she heads out. I won't go far."

Digg and Roy leaving means that Felicity and Oliver are alone in the lair. The silence that settles over them is deafening. They're both excited for Digg and Lyla. They are. But it's also a stark reminder of Oliver's insistence that he can't live his life and have his mission. And, for Oliver anyhow, it's a blatant sign that some people can balance protecting the city with things like love and home and family. After all, this mission has become Digg's as well.

"Why did you do this?" Felicity asks, breaking the silence and startling Oliver.

For a horrible moment he's confused about what she means, thinks she's blaming him for their lack of a relationship. He wouldn't fault her if she did, really. But she doesn't. She's not talking about that. She's talking about the computer.

"I couldn't even think with all of the beeping," he admits. "And I was trying to spar against Sara."

"And instead of calling me and asking me how to turn off the sound you decided to go all Rocky on my baby?" Felicity grills him.

"I… reacted. I didn't think. I'm sorry, Felicity," he tells her. "I promise I won't do it again."
"That's right you won't," she grumbles, turning back to the machine and pulling out a motherboard or a video card or some other piece of the computer that Oliver can't identify. "I don't mess with your bow, do I?"

"Lover's spat?" Asks a voice that makes Oliver's skin crawl.

How he got in the lair without either of them noticing, Oliver has no idea. How he's even alive, Oliver has no idea. But it's terrifying. He is terrifying. And it's sheer instinct that puts Oliver directly in front of Felicity with a knife drawn and positioned defensively.

But then, Malcolm Merlyn tends to have that effect on him.

"You're dead," Oliver tells him.

Merlyn has the nerve to smirk and it makes Oliver want to kill him all over again.

"You can't kill me Oliver," Malcolm tells him, his tone patronizing. "You can't even beat me."

"Want to test that? Again?" Oliver growls tensely.

"Someday, maybe," Malcolm replies offhandedly, like he hasn't just been challenged in a battle to the death. "But not today."

"Why are you here?" Oliver asks guardedly.

"The same reason you are, I imagine," he replies. "Because your secret identity is crumbling quickly and your whole world is about to come crashing down around you."

"Is that a threat, Merlyn?" Oliver asks, hackles raised.

"Not at all," Merlyn responds. "You misunderstand me. I suppose that's not all that surprising, given our history. But this isn't about that."

"What is it about then?" Oliver presses.

"You're treading water here," Malcolm tells him. "And while you might be staying afloat for now, that can't last forever. Sooner or later you're going to drown in this. And you're going to take all your friends and family down with you."

The mention of family sets Oliver even more on edge, which is not actually a thing that had seemed possible previous to it happening.

"Thea isn't involved in this. She doesn't know who the Arrow is," Oliver says.

"Oh, I know that," Malcolm assures him. "She's been spending quality family time with me for months. We're making up for lost time. I'm well aware that she has no idea what you are."

The only thing that keeps Oliver from attacking Merlyn at that is the gentle press of Felicity's hand on his back as she rises to stand next to him. It's grounding. Her presence always is.

"You're going to let her go," Oliver tells him.

"She's not my prisoner. She's my daughter," Merlyn says, having the nerve to actually sound affronted. "But this isn't about Thea. At least not directly. That's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here because right now all I'm hearing are reasons to kill you. Again," Oliver
"I'm here because I have a vested interest in continuing to keep your identity a secret," Merlyn tells him. "And I have a solution to fix your little media problem."

"What?" Felicity demands, speaking up for the first time against Merlyn since he'd walked in.

"They want the Arrow. So I'll give him to them," Merlyn tells them.

"Like hell you will," Felicity hisses. "You're not just going to waltz in here and hand Oliver over to-"

Merlyn interrupts her by laughing. Which is incredibly annoying. And patronizing. And both Oliver and Felicity hate him a little more for it.

"Your defense of him is admirable, if not misplaced, Ms. Smoak. I can see why he likes you, even if I can't see what he's done to deserve such loyalty," Malcolm announces. "But you misunderstand my intentions."

"Then make them clearer," she tells him.

"I'm going to turn myself over. As the Arrow," he informs them.

There's a beat of wary silence as Felicity and Oliver weigh his words.

"What?" Oliver breathes. "Why?"

"I have my reasons," Malcolm says dismissively.

"And what happens next time I'm seen as the Arrow?" Oliver asks.

"I'm here to solve one of your problems, Oliver. Not all of them," Malcolm tells him.

"No," Felicity says firmly.

"Why not?" Malcolm asks. "This is the perfect solution for your little team. I'll take the blame. Everyone will believe it. I'll go to Iron Heights, break out in a day or two and go back to being a ghost. It solves everything. Why would you say no?"

"Um, because I refuse to be this generation's Eva Braun!" Felicity hisses.

"Ah," Merlyn says with a smirk. "You're worried everyone will think we were involved. Bit of a shallow reason to refuse a way to solve the crisis that's about to get all of you sent to jail or killed, isn't it?"

"No," Felicity says instantly. "Because that would follow me around for the rest of my life in every way. Forget making friends or going on dates, that would kill any career prospects that weren't directly under Oliver's control and the media would never leave me alone. I refuse to accept that. I'm not going to be a footnote in a history book proclaiming me to be 'Malcolm Merlyn's one-time lover.' That's not the life I want and I'm not going to settle for it just because it's safer."

"I may have underestimated how much you hate me," Malcolm muses.

"You may have underestimated how much everyone hates you. You're a genocidal elitist maniac," Felicity tells him.

"No one's perfect," Merlyn says shrugging.
"You have your answer," Oliver says, speaking up again. "It's not changing. I'm going to give you one chance to leave this room and leave this city. If I see your face around here again, I'm aiming for it. Are we clear?"

"You disappoint me, Oliver," Malcolm says shaking his head. "I thought you had more sense than this. But I suppose even the most rational of men has been felled by the influence of a beautiful woman."

"Go," Felicity orders him, her voice strong and clear.

"I think you're going to regret this," Merlyn tells them, voice more pitying than threatening.

But he leaves the way he came - swiftly and silently. Still, he leaves behind a sense of unease that permeates the lair, like he's somehow corrupted it with his very presence.

"How is he alive?" Felicity asks after a moment.

"I have no idea," Oliver says, running his hands through his close-cropped hair. "He should be dead. I thought he was dead. Instead he's been playing house with my sister for months."

"What are we going to do?" Felicity asks, her voice nervous and unsettled.

"We'll come up with something," Oliver says reassuringly.

"I'm not crazy, right?" Felicity questions. "I mean… I get that it would solve our immediate problem but it opens up so many more."

"You're not crazy," Oliver tells her, touching her upper arm in gentle affirmation. "If people thought you were involved with Malcolm Merlyn it would put you in even more danger. We can't afford that."

"Even if it makes the rest of the team safer?" Felicity asks him nervously.

"I already told you, your safety is my top priority. That hasn't changed," he says heavily, his thumb stroking against the bare skin of her arm. "It's not going to."

They're standing fairly close together, but both of them feels the distance between them keenly. So close, but so far away.

"I'm all for being safe," she says quietly. "But there are things I wouldn't sacrifice in the name of my safety."

"I know," he tells her, fully aware they're no longer talking about Malcolm Merlyn. "Your safety isn't the only factor, though."

"I know," she echoes, her tone every bit as longing as his had been.

It's very hard for him to convince himself that her feelings aren't the same as his when she sounds like that, when she looks at him like that.

"I need to fix the computer," she says after a moment, stepping back and breaking their connection. "I have to figure out why our security failed and how Merlyn got in the lair."

"Yeah," he says, also stepping back and forcing distance between them. "I'm going to train for a bit I think."
"Okay," she agrees, biting her lip as she turns back to the computer.

He turns toward the training dummy and starts to let out all of the aggression he couldn't release against Malcolm Merlyn. He's still at it an hour later when she finally gets the computer fixed and the news feeds start beeping insanely again.

He thinks, at first, that it's going to be Debbie's story, breaking with news of her chat with the Arrow.

It's not.

That would have been better.

Instead, it's every media outlet in the world reporting that Malcolm Merlyn has turned himself in as the Arrow.

They're not treading water anymore, suddenly.

They're caught in a riptide. And they are drowning.

Chapter End Notes

So... that just happened. I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm a terrible liar. Next chapter by next weekend at the latest (with big Olicity moments in it).
"Oh my god," Felicity says, her hand covering her mouth as she stares at the computer screen. "No. No. No. No. NO."

Her breathing goes too rapid very quickly, like she can't get enough oxygen, and Oliver's seen that terrified, too-focused look in her eyes before. He knows the signs of a panic attack when he sees them.

"Hey, you're fine," he says, turning her chair to face him, breaking her view of the computer screen.

He crouches to her level and takes her hands in his, letting his thumbs trace rhythmic, soothing circles against the delicate skin of her inner wrists.

"I've got you," he tells her solemnly, eyes searching hers. "You're okay. Focus on your breathing. You're here and you're with me. You're safe."

She nods and takes unsteady, carefully measured breaths, her watery blue eyes fixed on his. The connection brings her back. Slowly. Breathing comes easier. She's more present. But the sense of terror dulls only slightly.

A panic attack had not been an entirely unwarranted response to the situation.

"What are we going to do?" She asks after a moment, voice sounding small and ill-fitting. "He's ruined me. What the hell do we do?"

Oliver swallows tightly.

"Maybe he shouldn't be the only one who comes forward as the Arrow," he suggests.

"No," Felicity says, shaking her head.

"I have the gear. We have the lair. There's plenty of proof that I'm the Arrow, Felicity. It's an option," Oliver tells her.

"No, it's not," she counters firmly. "We can't solve one problem by creating a dozen more. You don't get to give yourself up for me. This city needs you. What we do is more important than any one of us."

It should be. He knows that. And in some ways it is. But, in his heart, in those parts of himself he tries to deny, they're dangerously even - his city and his partner. It's happened in spite of him. In spite of everything. This city needs to be his top priority. He can't let himself value her in equal measure, can't let himself value her more, and yet... and yet it's happening anyhow. Or maybe it already happened. Maybe it's already too late.

"The city needs you, too," he replies, his voice thick. "And so do I. I need you."

She sucks in a little breath at that, her eyes darting to his mouth before zeroing in on his eyes again, waiting for him to elaborate.

"I'm not me without you," he confides, dropping his gaze to look at his hands still curled around the delicate bones of her wrists. "I thought I could do this alone once. I can't. I know that now. You make me better. You make all of us better."
"Oliver," she murmurs, her voice breathless.

He can feel her pulse racing in her wrists. And he wants this. He wants her. Every bit of him does. The Arrow. Oliver Queen. Every single part of him knows he needs her in his life, that his life and his mission are less without her in them.

He just hasn't quite figured out how to balance it all.

But he wants to.

She lifts her small hand to touch the side of his face, but he doesn't let go of her wrist. He holds onto her as she reaches for him and there's something deeply symbolic about that that he doesn't have the presence of mind to think about at the moment. Because her fingers cradle against his cheek with gentleness and affection and it sucks the breath right out of him.

His eyes drift shut as he savors the feel of her touch and he turns his head slightly to press his lips against her palm. A shudder races through her and when he opens his eyes again he finds her staring at him with some mixture of hope and apprehension.

"Ol- Oliver?" She asks, her voice hoarse and quiet.

The moment feels huge, like a turning point, even if he isn't quite sure what direction they're heading yet. He still can't make sense of how to be what he needs to be and what he wants to be at the same time. Honestly, he's not sure he can.

His phone rings, shrill and loud in the quiet of the lair, and Felicity physically jumps at the noise. Her hand pulls back out of reflex and Oliver silently curses whoever felt the need to call him at this moment.

"What?" He asks abruptly as he answers the phone.

"Is she with you?" Is Sara's greeting.

It's not playful. At all. And considering it's Sara calling, that says a lot.

"Yes," Oliver says, standing from his crouch, his eyes fixed on Felicity.


"Why, Sara?" Oliver asks. "What happened? Is this about Merlyn?"

"Yes, it's about Merlyn," Sara responds immediately. "The whole damn city has gone insane. The media has gone nuts and QC has gotten two death threats against Felicity in the last twenty minutes. You need to get her here. Safe. Immediately."

"I'm going to kill Malcolm Merlyn," Oliver growls lowly.

"Great. I like that plan. I'll help. Nyssa will, too. But first, you need to get your girl here where we can protect her best," Sara says. "Where are you now?"

"The lair," Oliver answers.

"Good. I'm almost tempted to tell you guys to just stay there," Sara tells him.

"She'll never agree to stay locked away down here indefinitely," Oliver says knowingly.
"Yeah, not happening," Felicity pipes up.

"Call Roy," Oliver tells Sara. "We need him running interference. I want him geared up and visible somewhere nowhere near QC. Maybe he can distract some of the media attention."

"It's worth a shot, I guess. But, Ollie… This is bad," Sara tells him with gravity.

"Yeah. I got that," Oliver replies. "We'll be there in ten minutes."

He hangs up the phone and looks at Felicity, dreading having to relay the conversation and wondering how so much emotional upheaval had happened in the last hour or so.

"How bad is it?" She asks, standing slowly and leaning one hand against her desk.

"Bad," Oliver replies. "It's not just the media. There've been death threats."

"Against me," she says.

It's not a question.

A sharp burst of nervous laughter escapes her lips and he grabs her hand in support. She's his partner. And she needs him. This, at least, he can give her.

"We will fix this, Felicity," he tells her, meaning every word of it.

"How?" She asks. "Oliver, I can't see a fix here. This isn't something we can hack or put an arrow in or defuse."

"There's a way back from this. We just haven't seen it yet. We're too close to it," Oliver tells her. "For now, we need to get you safely back to QC. Make sure your family is safe. Then we can sit down and work through this. Together. Okay?"

"My family's fine," Felicity says absently. "I… possibly sent my mom and grandmother to some exclusive spa outside of town for a few days. Under assumed names that I may have hacked the system to give them reservations under. Gram thinks they're celebrities or something. They were both very excited about it."

"And it keeps them away from the media," Oliver says knowingly.

"Neither one of them is really good at keeping their mouths shut. Guess that's an inherited trait," she says with a dry laugh.

"I like that you talk so much," Oliver reminds her, leaning down and kissing her temple affectionately. "We should go."

"Oliver," she says hesitantly as he grabs her coat for her. "Are we going to talk about earlier? Before Sara called? Or are we just going to stuff that into the box of things we pretend didn't happen?"

He watches her for a beat as she stands less than two feet away from him, looking nervous and slightly fidgety. It strikes him then how ill-fitting that look is on her. How she's usually so confident, all brightness and joy. Not right now, though. And he did that to her. He keeps doing that to her.

"That's up to you," he says finally.

"Is it?" She asks cautiously.
"Yeah," he tells her.

"That's new," she replies.

"Yeah," he repeats.

"Is this because of Malcolm Merlyn? Because of the threats?" Felicity asks warily.

"No," he tells her. "It's because of me."

"I like that better," she says.

"Yeah. Me too," he responds.

"We'll talk back at the QC apartments then. Okay?" She asks, sounding like she's testing him.

Maybe she is.

"Okay," he agrees easily, holding her coat out for her.

She slips it on without a word and he frees her hair from underneath the collar of the jacket, letting his fingers skim against the back of her neck and smiling a little at the barely audible sigh that slips through her lips. It's impossible to ignore the feeling of rightness in the moment. And he can see it - he can see it - fitting so naturally into their lives every day. The thought is simultaneously terrifying, exhilarating and infinitely sad.

Just because it feels right, just because he wants it badly enough that it hurts, doesn't mean it's something he can have. Not really.

Felicity may find that the conversation she wants to have with him back at the apartments doesn't go the way she wants.

"Let's go," he says, surprising her by reaching out for her hand.

She takes it, even though she looks like she's expecting him to change his mind at any moment.

The only thing that surprises Felicity when Oliver eventually lets go of her hand is how long it takes for that to happen. When he does, his hand settles against the small of her back, finding the small strip of skin between her barely cropped shirt and her skirt. It's like he wants to keep touching her in some way, in any way. And, while she's wary of reading into all of this too much, it still makes her feel a little giddy in spite of herself.

Sara greets them in the hall as they get off the elevator, looking as on-edge as Felicity has ever seen. And that's saying something.

"How bad?" Oliver asks immediately.

"Getting worse by the moment," Sara tells him. "I'm going out to give Roy some backup now that you're here. I didn't realize there were that many reporters in the world, honestly. Bryce is all over the news gloating about his victory. He hasn't come by yet looking for her, but I'd bet that's on the agenda."

"Undoubtedly," Oliver growls.

"Nyssa will be in town sometime tomorrow," Sara tells them. "But until then…"
"We'll need to call Waller," Oliver admits. "Lyla's in labor."

"Already done," Sara tells him. "She was shockingly helpful. It was actually fairly unsettling. She's got four men she's sending over for protection."

"Please tell me it's not the Suicide Squad," Felicity begs.

"It's not," Sara says, smiling in spite of the situation. "Apparently our situation doesn't quite meet that level of crazy."

"Well that's something anyhow," Felicity mutters. "On a scale of one to Suicide Squad, my crisis lands somewhere between the levels of international assassin ninjas and ARGUS soldiers without bombs in their spines."

"Did anyone call Digg?" Oliver asks.

"No way," Felicity vetoes. "We aren't bothering him right now."

"It's you, Felicity," Oliver tells her. "He'd want to know."

"John called me," Sara announces. "Apparently they overheard some nurses talking and Lyla gave him hell between contractions for being with her instead of protecting his team. But I told him we had it covered. There's not much he could do at the moment anyhow."

"Where's Laurel?" Oliver asks.

"Putting out fires with the SCPD and trying to see if she can get any clue as to what Merlyn's agenda here is," Sara says. "Neither of which she's having much success with at the moment. Sin checked in, too. She says a lot of people in the Glades don't believe Merlyn. But those that do are looking for blood."

"They can have Merlyn's," Oliver announces. "But they aren't getting at Felicity."

"I've gotta go," says Sara, glancing at her phone. "Black Canary needs to put down a protest that's turned violent outside of Merlyn Global."

"These aren't drug dealers or weapons traffickers, Sara," Felicity reminds her. "These are confused, angry people who think they just found out that their hero is really a villain. I'm all for getting the violence under control, but try to remember that these probably mostly aren't hardened criminals."

"God, you're nice. How are you so nice?" Sara asks bewildered. "I'm not going to kill any of them. Even if they do want your pretty little head on a platter right now. You two stay here. Waller's men should be here within an hour."

"That should probably be more comforting than it is," Felicity observes.

"Nothing about Waller is comforting," Oliver responds darkly.

There's a lot more to Oliver's history with ARGUS than Felicity knows. She's sure of it. But that's okay. He doesn't need to tell her. She's always respected his need to keep parts of his history hidden. There's parts of herself she hasn't shared with him either.

"You'll be fine in QC," Sara tells her. "But I wouldn't leave unless you absolutely have to."

"Why would I have to?" Felicity asks, failing to think of a single reason she would choose to leave the safety of the building for at least the next day.
"Bomb threat?" Sara shrugs. "Triad attack? Anything else that might happen to us on a random
weeknight?"

"Oh… right. Of course," Felicity nods, because she'd sort of forgotten momentarily that those sorts
of things might be probable these days.

"I really have to go," Sara says, glancing at her phone again.

"Go," Oliver instructs Sara. "I've got her."

Sara might be in a rush, but she still takes the time to stare pointedly at the miniscule distance
between them and smirk.

"I can see that," Sara says sweetly.

Oliver doesn't growl back at her in response. Or glare. Or force distance between them. Or anything
else Felicity might have expected. Instead he just looks at her. Briefly. But it's with a soft smile that
barely quirks his lips and crinkles near his eyes. It's so subtle, so innocent and genuine that she can't
stop staring back at him and she can't stop her heart from thudding wildly in her chest. She wants this
to mean something more than she ever has before.

Sara laughs sharply and shakes her head, which grabs Felicity's attention, but the assassin doesn't say
a word as she steps into the elevator and leaves Oliver and Felicity alone in the hall.

"So…" Felicity says after a quiet moment. "My place or yours?"

"Wha… What?" Oliver asks blinking at her.

The suggestive nature of her comment hits her a second later and Felicity pinches her eyes shut as
she tries to fight down a rather fierce blush. She's fairly unsuccessful.

"If you're being my bodyguard for the moment, I'm thinking we probably don't want to be hanging
out in the hallway all afternoon," she explains. "My mouth just decided to say that in… the worst
way possible, apparently."

"Your place is fine," Oliver tells her with mild amusement. "It's nicer than mine."

"Oliver, they're identical," she points out to him.

"The layouts might be the same, but yours feels like home," he tells her as she unlocks her door.

She freezes with her hand on the knob at his words and she tries not to read too much into it. But he's
not making that easy. Not today.

"You can't just say things like that, Oliver," she tells him softly. "You can't. Not if you don't… Not if
you can't be in this with me. Because you say things like that and it hurts because it's everything I
want to hear from you but you say them and then nothing changes."

She can't turn and look at him, but she doesn't have to see him to know he hasn't moved. She has
always been hyper-aware of his presence. Still, she's a little startled at his closeness when he rests
one large hand on her shoulder. He's near enough that she imagines she can feel the heat of his body
against her back. Maybe she can.

Her eyes slam shut and she bites her lower lip as her hand grips the doorknob tighter. This is too
much. He's too much. She doesn't know how to handle this right now.
"Can we talk about this inside?" He asks her gently.

Her head jerks to the side a little and she looks at him. Of everything she might have expected him to say, that would not have been on the list.

"Really?" She asks cautiously. "You want to talk about this? About us?"

"I said we could, didn't I?" He asks her with great seriousness.

She opens the door without breaking eye contact with him.

Tension fills the room as they walk in. Felicity feels it keenly. It crawls along her skin and makes the air heavy. She's sure the pounding of her heartbeat has got to be loud enough for him to hear, even though she crosses the room to stand near the windows and he only walks halfway to her, standing a good five feet away and looking at her with so much longing that it chokes her.

"Is this the part where you tell me you can't be the Arrow and be with me? Or am I jumping ahead?" She asks.

It's defensive, but she can't help it. They've had this conversation before and she's not sure she can stand to have it in its entirety again.

"It's the part where I tell you that you're the single best thing in my life," he tells her. "And I don't deserve you. If I were just Oliver Queen… No, not even that. If I were just Oliver… if we could strip all the rest of it away, I would hold onto you and I don't think I could ever let go. But, I'm not just Oliver, Felicity. I live my life in shadows and hiding behind a mask and the Arrow doesn't get to live the life he wants just because he wants it."

"No!" She protests, shaking her head fiercely. "No. That's not fair because you aren't the Arrow, Oliver. We are. All of us. You and me and Digg and Roy and Sara. This isn't just you and it hasn't been in a really long time. So you don't get to do that, split yourself and hide behind your mask, because you aren't the only one wearing it."

"God, you are so beautiful when you're passionate about something," he breathes in astonishment, staring at her like she's everything.

"You can't keep doing that!" She cries. "You can't say things like that in one breath and that you can't be with me in the next!"

"I'm not trying to. But, I can't choose between you and the city, Felicity," he says, begging with his eyes for her to understand.

"Who's asking you to? Not me, that's for sure," she points out. "Forget about me for a minute. This isn't even about me. Not really. I'm not asking you to choose me. I'm asking you to choose you. I'm asking you to let yourself be happy, no matter what that means. Full disclosure, I do hope that also involves choosing me, but even if it doesn't… I want more for you than this. And you should, too."

"I think me choosing my own happiness would always mean me choosing you," he tells her. "And I want that. I do. I just don't know how that works. Not when we live the lives we do. Not when you make me just want to be Oliver. I don't have that luxury."

"Here's the thing that you don't seem to get," she tells him, taking two steps forward until she's solidly in his personal space. "I don't want you to just be Oliver. I love our mission. I love the meaning you've helped bring to my life. And there's nothing about you that doesn't draw me in.
Every bit of you makes me babble and blush and want *more* for us whether you're jumping off of rooftops or trying to pretend you're paying attention in the boardroom or completely failing to get pop culture references that *definitely* predate the island. It doesn't matter. Because it's *all you*.

"Do you know what I think?" She challenges further. "I think you're terrified. I know I am. The lives we lead, the things we do, they're dangerous. They're *worth it*, but they're dangerous. Every single mission something could go wrong and you might not come home. It's scary to have feelings for someone who faces life-and-death situations on a regular basis. But do you know what scares me more than the idea of losing you, Oliver? The idea of us just going on like we are, never being more than a couple of kisses we pretend never happened and longing looks we try to deny and looking back one day and wondering *what if?* That scares the hell out of me. Life is short no matter how you live it. I don't want mine filled with regrets."

He moves so quickly that it doesn't even register with her until his lips crash into hers and they both stumble a few steps until her back is pressed against the floor-to-ceiling window, the cityscape spread out behind her.

They have never lacked for intensity, but there's an edge of abandon to this moment that sends something spiraling in her gut. He is usually so controlled, so precise, but this isn't that at all. This is him *feeling* and *reacting* and scarcely able to reign himself in and it's easily the most thrilling kiss of her life thus far.

Because it's *him*. And it's *real*.

There's a second before her brain really processes what's going on. That's fair, really. The transition from arguing about why they don't have a relationship to him kissing her like his life depends on it was really very sudden. But when it does fully register, she tilts her head slightly and slides her tongue between her lips to run across the seam of his mouth. The groan he answers with borders on obscene and a shudder runs through her as it reverberates across her lips.

His mouth opens to hers and the press of his tongue against hers is maybe the best thing she's ever felt right up until the moment he presses her more firmly against the window with his thigh between her legs. And *oh god* that's a whole different level entirely.

She gasps a couple of times in quick succession, her lips still pressed against his, and wraps both of her arms around his neck. It's possible she's trying to keep him exactly where he is. But that's not really something she needs to worry about at the moment because he's as lost in this as she is.

She whimpers as he draws her lower lip between his teeth, which meets with a low moan of approval from him. The light scrape of her nails against the nape of his neck brings another moan, more desperate this time, and she's struck by the fact that this is *really happening*. She's really learning all these little things that make Oliver's control slip and his masks fall away, if only for a moment, and as amazing as making out with him like a damned teenager is, that's absolutely the best thing about it.

He's pressed his fingertips against the glass on either side of her head, like he's trying to keep himself from touching her, in spite of the way his mouth is sliding against hers and his thigh is pressing between her legs. It's like one last part of him is holding back from this, from them. Like if he doesn't let himself *touch* her, maybe it's not all real.

She's not about to let that stand.

Her hands drops from his neck, but she keeps nipping at his lips, a clear sign to him that she's not ending this. And then, she brings one hand up, slides it between his and the cool glass of the window
and twines their fingers together.

The choked noise he makes as he pulls his head back slightly is overwhelmed, disbelieving. He stares at their fingers for a second, his lips no longer on hers but his body still fully pressed against her. Her bright pink nails curl through the gaps in his fingers and grip at his hand. He's looking at them like he can't quite understand how they got there, what he did to deserve this.

"I want this every bit as much as you do," she tells him, her voice breathless and used. "And I want you to know, I'm going to hold on to this, to us. Because we're worth fighting for."

His free hand stops pressing against the window at that, slides through her hair instead, and she can feel a slight tremor in his fingers as his thumb skirts across the back edge of her jaw. There is need and want and desire all wrapped up in this moment and it's thrumming through both of them in a heady way that makes her feel dizzy and drunk on him.

She savors the feel of it, her eyes fluttering shut and her head leaning into his touch. Her skin buzzes with it and her head swims with it and it's right. Finally.

"We are," he says, surprise shading his voice like maybe he's just made this realization.

Her eyes fly open at that and catch his gaze, clear-eyed and full of something close to wonder.

"Yeah?" She asks hesitantly, nervously, like she's scared to believe him.

"Yeah," he confirms and leans down to kiss her again.

It's slow and soft this time, the frenzy of before having given way to something gentler, more stable but every bit as vibrant. He lets go of her hand to frame her face with his hands instead and she rests her hands so that her fingertips skirt along the ridge of his collarbones and she sighs against the soft, firm pressure of his lips against hers.

It's perfect.

"Oh my God, I need to go bleach my eyes!"

It's sort of a small miracle that Felicity doesn't accidentally slam her face against Oliver's as she jumps at the voice. Thank goodness. That would have been miserable to explain to everyone.

"Don't you knock, Roy?" Oliver growls in the direction of the door, his body still mostly blocking Felicity's from view.

"I did!" Roy protests. "Like… a lot! You clearly didn't hear me. Do we need to talk about what bodyguarding is? Because I am starting to wonder if maybe it's been misunderstood."

This is far from the smartest thing Roy has ever said.

"Roy!" Oliver snaps, his voice incredibly threatening.

"Roy can you give us like… five minutes?" Felicity asks, peeking her head out from around the wall of Oliver's chest as she grips him by one very tense bicep to urge him to stay in place.

She knows what Roy's thinking. She can practically hear it, some horrible quip about only needing five more minutes not being something to admit to. He actually opens his mouth like he's going to say it, but her incredulous look and widened eyes still his tongue. He smirks instead and shakes his head.
"Sure, blondie. Anything for you," he says in place of purposefully antagonizing Oliver and Felicity breathes a sigh of relief as he turns and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm sorry," Felicity says immediately with a little sigh.

"I didn't hear the knock either," Oliver points out, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "That's my fault. Crass as he might have been, Roy wasn't wrong about that."

"Not that," she replies, biting her lip a little. "Or, well… okay sort of that. I just… I'm sorry Roy saw all that because maybe you… wouldn't have wanted him to."

He's quiet for a minute and she feels unsettled under the weight of his gaze, but she doesn't look him in the eye until his fingers lift her chin to look straight at him. His eyes burn with intensity, blue like the hottest part of a flame, and the air sizzles and embers smolder inside her and she just might melt under the heat of it all but she's surely not complaining.

"I'm not running from this and I'm not hiding this, Felicity," he tells her seriously. "From the media, sure. Because we have to. For now. But I won't hide us from the people that matter. You mean too much for that."

She bites her lower lip as a smile threatens to overtake her face. Maybe it's contagious because it spreads to him quickly enough. A little bubble of laughter wells up inside her and she can't help but let it out, a little vocal burst of joy.

"Okay," she agrees, smiling as broadly as she ever has in her life.

"Okay," Oliver agrees, dipping his head down to kiss the skin of her shoulder. "We should probably let Roy back in."

"Probably," she allows, drawing the word out like she's musing over it.

"Come on," he laughs, taking her hand gently in his. "It might actually be important."

And it really might be. There's a lot going on right now that demands their attention. Big, life-altering things. Still, looking back at Oliver's untethered smile and feeling his thumb stroke the backs of her knuckles, the bar is set pretty high if Roy's reason for barging in is intending to be more important than this.
"Your lipstick is… places other than your lips," is the first thing Roy says when they let him in the room. "And you have sex hair. It's… disturbing. I'm disturbed. It's a good thing you're a billionaire, Oliver, because therapy doesn't come cheap and I'm not paying."

"Killing you would be free," Oliver points out with a tight, forced smile.

"I do not have-" Felicity starts before spying her own reflection in a mirror. "Oh my god. How do I have sex hair when I didn't even have sex? That feels unfair somehow."

"Therapy. So much therapy," Roy says, not quite drowning out the sound of Oliver's breath catching in his throat.

"Was there something you needed Roy?" Oliver asks gruffly.

When Roy opens his mouth to respond, Oliver cuts him off instantly.

"Other than therapy, that is," Oliver clarifies.

"Yeah. Waller called Sara. Her people got tied up with something. I think literally. They won't be here until tomorrow," Roy tells them.

"The hell they did," Oliver bristles. "Waller's playing games. Why did she call Sara instead of me?"

"Dunno," Roy shrugs. "I'm guessing she didn't want to deal with your angry voice, but I could be wrong."

"It's fine," Felicity cuts in. "I'm not going anywhere right now anyhow."

"That's the other thing…" Roy said wincing.

"What other thing?" Oliver asks, his voice edgy at Roy's preemptive discomfort.

"Laurel says she's bought us 'til morning, but Bryce is gonna bring Felicity downtown for questioning. And he's prepared to file charges against her," Roy answers hesitantly.

Felicity's nerves must be showing at this revelation because Oliver pulls her against his chest and holds her tightly to him. Or maybe it's his nerves. Either way, he's suddenly holding her like he has no intention of ever letting her go. That, at least, is sort of great.

"You aren't going to jail," he tells her into her hair.

"What are you going to do, Oliver? Swoop into the station with your hood on, put some arrows in Bryce and rescue me from the hands of the police?" She asks like it's a ridiculous notion.

From the way he freezes she can tell he's thinking it over, though. She's pretty sure he doesn't hold the same opinion of the idea's ridiculousness.

"No, Oliver. That's not a plan. We aren't doing that," she informs him.
"It's not my first choice," he hedges.

"It's not any choice," she says, pulling away from him slightly. "We're not solving one problem by creating a dozen more, remember?"

"Depends on what problem it is," he responds evenly.

"Oliver," she starts in protest.

"They can't have you, Felicity. I won't allow it."

"Laurel's a really good lawyer, Oliver," Felicity reminds him. "I have faith in her. And Bryce is counting way too much on circumstantial evidence and public opinion. They can arrest me. But they won't convict me. I'm not going anywhere."

"Look, I gotta go meet up with Sin about some stuff," Roy says, shifting the conversation. "But, Oliver, Sara wanted to talk to you about what went down at Merlyn Global... or maybe something about the League. I dunno, I wasn't really paying attention."

"You're a great messenger, Roy," Oliver tells him dryly.

"She's back?" Felicity asks.

"Yeah. Been back like half an hour. She's in her room," Roy tells them.

Felicity blinks in surprise and glances toward a clock in the kitchen. Oh. Oh. There was a lot more kissing happening than she'd realized, apparently.

"All right," Oliver says. "We'll go see what she needs."

"Actually, Felicity says. "Unless she needs me to, I'd rather stay here for a bit. It's been... a crazy day so far and I'd really like to change into something frumpy and blast some bad music for a bit. These walls are soundproof right? It seems like they'd be soundproof."

Oliver's face does a weird thing at that comment until she remembers... oh, right... his father's one-time love-nest. Yeah...

"Nevermind. I'm sure they are," she mutters.

Roy has the nerve to laugh.

"I don't like leaving you on your own," Oliver says uneasily.

"Oliver. I'll be in a locked penthouse suite of a building you own with security you employ and you'll be in the room next door. I'll be fine," Felicity points out with amusement. "Besides, I'm alone at night, right? This is just like that only I'll be awake to see if someone tries to get in the door."

"You were alone last night," he tells her weightily, his gaze locked with hers. "Doesn't mean you'll be alone tonight."

Her brain sort of short-circuits at that. She possibly stops breathing.

"Oh god, I'm gonna go," Roy says uncomfortably. "I'm glad you two are... over your issues or whatever but this mush is gonna kill me."

Neither Felicity nor Oliver actually say anything as Roy leaves, but Roy probably prefers it that way
"So, you'll come back after you've talked to Sara?" Felicity asks after a moment.

"Yeah," he confirms. "I'm not… I don't want you to think I'm rushing you or pushing anything. That's not what I meant. I just… I won't sleep tonight if I'm next door wondering if you're okay and thinking about Bryce and the Triad and Merlyn and the media. I'd just like to be with you. If that's okay."

It's as unsure and fumbly as she's ever seen him and it strikes her suddenly that he's nervous. Her heart flops at that and she honesty loves him a little more for it.

"That's more than okay, Oliver," she replies, biting her lips together to keep her smile from totally taking over her entire face.

"Yeah?" He asks on a sigh of relief.

"Yeah," she confirms, rising to her tiptoes to kiss him. "Now go see what Sara needs so you can come back to me and we can curl up on the sofa and not think about everything going on right now for an hour or two. Possibly with ice cream."

"I like the sound of that."

"Me too."

He kisses her again before he goes and she's left standing with her fingers touching her lips like she can't actually believe any of this is real.

This is legitimately the craziest weekend of her life.

She changes quickly, not sure how long Oliver's chat with Sara will take, selecting some yoga pants and an old M.I.T. shirt. Someone somewhere would be horrified at her first-evening-in-with-her-new-guy attire. Surely it violates some rules written up in Cosmo at some point. But she's not trying to impress Oliver. She'd rather be real with him. And right now? Her need for comfort-clothes is totally real.

She's pulling her hair back into a ponytail - because sex hair is totally unacceptable outside of a bed or sofa… or, okay, maybe on occasion a car - when she hears the door open again.

"That was fast," she says, turning toward the door.

But it isn't Oliver standing there.

No. Wrong Queen.

"Thea," Felicity says with no small amount of surprise.

"Who the hell are you and why is Malcolm Merlyn lying to save your ass?" Thea demands with zero preamble.

"Thea, I… Where have you been? It's been five months. You just disappeared. Do you have any idea how worried people were?" Felicity asks.

"I'm sorry?" Thea asks, arms crossed as she strides into the middle of the room like she owns it. Which, you know, she sort of does. "We've met like… twice? And you think I owe you an explanation?"
"Maybe not," Felicity allows. "But I think you owe one to Roy. And I know you owe one to Oliver."

"Wow do you suck at minding your own business," Thea bites back. "How about you keep your nose out of my relationships with my brother and my ex-boyfriend and instead we talk about why the hell Malcolm Merlyn is confessing to being the Arrow when I know for a fact that he isn't."

"Why don't you ask him?" Felicity asks.

"Um… because he's in jail?" Thea says looking at her like she's crazy.

"Um… yeah, but I'm pretty sure he still has visiting hours," Felicity points out. "And you're Thea Queen. You have like more money than most small countries. Money buys access, right? Not that you should even need it since you're family and all, but still."

"What did you just say?" Thea breathes guardedly, her arms falling to her sides.

It takes a moment for Felicity's brain to catch up with her mouth. But when it does… well, shit. That's not something she was supposed to know, was it?

"Um… money buys access?" She tries weakly.

"Oliver told you that Malcolm Merlyn is my father?" Thea hisses angrily.

"Actually, if you want to get technical about it, she told me," Oliver's voice comes from the doorway.

"Oliver… What?" Thea asks, looking to her brother with obvious confusion.

"It's a long story," Oliver tells her. "Felicity was looking into some financial things for Walter with the company. She tripped upon some evidence mom had buried, doctors she'd paid off, things like that. She came to me with it."

"I can't believe this," Thea says with a huff of surprise.

"It doesn't matter now, Speedy," Oliver replies. "Where have you been?"

"I… Italy. I told you that," Thea responds with an over-insistent tone that sort of screams she's lying.

"With Malcolm?" Oliver asks.

"I don't have to explain myself to you, Ollie," Thea insists. "I needed to get away from here. I needed a fresh start. You agreed with me on that."

"Malcolm Merlyn is not a fresh start," Oliver counters.

"Maybe not," Thea agrees. "But he's not the Arrow either. I'm not here to stay, Ollie. I'm here to find out why my father, the only parent I have left, is taking the fall for something he didn't do."

Oliver's eyes dart over to Felicity who has been somewhat conspicuously quiet. But then, she hasn't had much desire to insert herself into the middle of Queen sibling drama. Frankly, she's going enough drama of her own these days.

"We don't know, exactly," Oliver says measuredly.

"He's covering for someone. I want to know who and I want to know why because he
couldn't possibly have been busted kissing your assistant over there the other night when he was in another country with me!" Thea insists.

"You're right," Oliver tells her.

"Oliver…" Felicity says, her tone warning because she really isn't sure about the look on his face right now.

Oliver looks to her briefly but says nothing before looking back to Thea.

"Malcolm wasn't the one kissing Felicity the other night," Oliver continues. "I was."

Thea startles at that, blinking like she can't make sense of what he's confessing to.

"You were," Thea repeats in a way that isn't a question.

"Yes," Oliver confirms.

"You're the Arrow," she states.

"Yes," Oliver confirms again, looking like he's bracing himself for her reaction.

Felicity's still standing off to the side, not wanting to intrude on the moment between the siblings, but it's Thea who draws her into everything. The younger girl looks to her as if she's looking for confirmation. No. Actually, that's not right. She's looking at Felicity like she wants her to tell her it's not true.

Felicity isn't sure who she feels worse for right now. Oliver or Thea.

"He's done… so much good, Thea. He's helped this city so much," Felicity tells her, taking a stilted step forward.

"I didn't want you drawn into this, Thea," he tells her, pulling her attention back to him. "I know my word might not mean much to you right now. I've lied to you a lot. But if you believe anything, please believe I've lied to you to keep you safe."

"All this time?" Thea asks, looking stunned and lost all at once. "All those lies you told that I knew couldn't possibly be true, all the times you flaked out on me or showed up late… you were out helping people? Saving people?"

Oliver is tense and hopeful and just watching Thea because he can't seem to find words to reply. Felicity can though.

"He was," she confirms with a small smile and whole lot of pride.

"You're a hero, Ollie," Thea says, wrapping her arms around him with so much affection that Oliver can't do anything but blink in surprise as he breathes out a stunned sigh of relief and lets his arms close around her. "Thank you."

In a lot of ways, Felicity feels sort of like an intruder on this moment between the Queen siblings, but it's also sort of beautiful to watch and she can't help but be taken in by the relief painted across Oliver's face as he catches her eye. He deserves this. Definitely. Absolutely, he deserves this. Thea's reaction could have gone any which way. She knows that. But this is the best of all possible worlds and Felicity is so incredibly grateful for it.

"Does… Ollie, does Malcolm know you're the Arrow?" Thea asks when she pulls back, blinking
with worry up toward her brother.

"Yeah. He does," Oliver admits.

Thea's shoulders sag at that and she backs up a few steps. The guilt on her face reminds Felicity more of Oliver than anything else she has ever seen of Oliver's sister.

"He's doing this for me," she says, looking devastated. "So that I don't lose you. He's taking the fall for me. It's not about the Arrow at all."

"Thea, I really doubt it's as simple as that," Oliver says carefully.

"Why didn't he tell me?" She says, seemingly not hearing him. "About you, about his plans, about any of this? Why leave me in the dark?"

"I don't know," Oliver tells her. "And, Thea… I don't like not knowing."

"I want to be mad at him," she says, blinking hard without really looking at anything. "For lying to me. For convincing me I had no one else to turn to, no one else I could trust. But then… he does this and he saves you and I just don't know how to feel."

"Wary," Oliver tells her. "Wary is how you should feel. Because you're right. It doesn't make sense. Even if he's doing this in part for you - and maybe he is - Malcolm Merlyn is never entirely selfless and he is never without a plan. There's something here we aren't seeing."

"I really hate mysteries," Felicity mutters to herself, pulling Thea's attention toward her again.

And the way Thea is looking at her sort of makes Felicity squirm. It's like she's really noticing her for the first time. Felicity feels very awkwardly like she's being judged. Then? Thea smirks.

"So… Ollie…" Thea says, her voice slightly sing-songish as she looks back toward her brother. "Felicity's your executive assistant. She clearly knows all about you being the Arrow. You've been busted by the press trading some awfully intimate looking lip-locks. Is there any part of your life that she here isn't a vital part of?"

"No," Oliver responds, his lips twitching into a little smile as his eyes dart toward Felicity. "There's really not."

"Uh huh," Thea pronounces with a self-satisfied look. "Felicity… I do think we're going to have to get to know each other better."

Felicity's aware enough of the roller coaster of revelations and emotions that Thea's been through since walking through her door to recognize that the younger woman is clearly looking for a distraction, something she can control to pull her attention away from her father's actions and her brother's revelations. Still, Thea Queen is a little intimidating under even the best of circumstances.

"Sure," Felicity agrees lightly. "We should have lunch or something. You know, as soon as I finish serving my time in the big house."

"What?" Thea asks, looking a little surprised.

"You aren't going to jail," Oliver tells her. "We won't let that happen."

"Why would she go to jail?" Thea asks confused.

"Because they're convinced she's been helping the Arrow," Oliver replies.
"To be fair, I am," Felicity acknowledges.

"Really not the point," Oliver responds.

"It's a little bit the point," she shrugs. "But I'm still in favor of no jail time for me. Sara told me about the difference between a shiv and a shank, but that's poor preparation and I still don't understand the whole pocket thing."

"Felicity, I'm going to talk to Waller, see if she can pull some strings. I'll talk to Nyssa, see if she has any influence. I will do anything and everything to keep you out of jail because that is not an option, okay?" Oliver says firmly.

"Or… I could talk to my father?" Thea suggests quietly.

"What?" Felicity asks.

"Look, we don't know what he's really up to. You're right. And Ollie, you're right that we should be wary. I get that," Thea admits. "But if he's doing this even a little bit for me, if I have any pull over him at all, maybe I can get him to deny her involvement. Maybe he can convince them he was acting alone. Or, maybe I can at least get an idea of what his plan is."

"I'm going with you," Oliver informs her.

"Like hell you are," Thea snorts. "You think he's going to talk to me with you there? I'm his daughter and you don't have any chips to play against him with at this point. Plus, do you really want yourself linked to him in any way when he's already given himself up as the Arrow? Because that seems like a bad idea."

"She's right," Felicity speaks up, much to Oliver's displeasure.

"Fine," Oliver responds through gritted teeth. "Then you take Roy."

Thea goes to object but Oliver cuts her off.

"He's been helping us, too, Thea," Oliver informs her. "For a long time. I trust him and he can protect you if he needs to."

"He's on the team," Felicity clarifies.

"There's a team?" Thea asks with added bewilderment.

"He goes with you," Oliver insists again, ignoring the questions. "If you see Merlyn. You take Roy."

"Fine. Fine," Thea says waving off his concern. "I will bring my vigilante side-kick ex-boyfriend with me when I go see my father who is masquerading as my brother - the actual vigilante superhero - in prison. Does that make you happy?"

"Not remotely," Oliver sighs.

The rest of the day passes by in a strange blur of moments that progress from nerve-wracking anxiety to dream-like joy and back again. Laurel comes by to discuss legal strategies at one point, in what has to be one of the most stressful conversations of Felicity's life. But after she leaves, Oliver pours them some wine, pulls Felicity onto his lap and they curl up on the sofa watching old episodes of Saturday Night Live. It's sort of blissful with his fingers stroking along the skin of her arm and the way he keeps dropping kisses onto her shoulder at random intervals as she laughs at the tv. It's
fantastic right up until Roy comes by to let them know that Felicity's apartment has been vandalized.

The day is thoroughly exhausting.

By the time night falls across the city and everything calms down just a little bit, Felicity honestly just wants to crawl into bed and pass out. With Oliver, though, so that's a whole new kind of exciting.

"Do you snore?" She wonders aloud absently as he exits the bathroom in just boxer shorts.

And oh my God had she seriously been having actual idea-shaped thoughts a moment ago? Because that's so not happening right now. And from the sly smile on his face as she rather incredibly blatantly checks him out, he completely knows that.

"Would you kick me out of bed if I did?" He asks.

She scoffs out loud at that because no, she is absolutely not kicking him out of her bed for any reason. Her bed? Is it her bed now? She's slept in it like once. But this is sort of her room. Does that make it her bed? He kind of technically owns it. Does that make it his bed? Is it maybe their bed? Oh wow that thought sends her brain in new directions. The bed, she decides. It's not her bed or his bed or their bed, it's just the bed.

"Eh," she shrugs as if she's on the fence. "Depends on if you're a blanket hog, I guess."

He's not, as it turns out. He sort of hogs her instead.

Oliver is, she discovers, incredibly cuddly in his sleep. And, after a far, far better night's sleep than she had any right to expect given the current circumstances of her life these days, she wakes up to him curled up behind her and literally wrapped around her. His legs are tangled with hers, his arm is snug around her waist and he's pressing soft kisses into the curve where her shoulder slopes up to her neck. It's awesome.

"This is so much better than my alarm clock," she sighs on a yawn, stretching her neck out a little more to give him easier access and lacing her fingers with his across her stomach.

He chuckles and the rumble of it tremors through her skin leaving goosebumps in its wake. If she makes a noise that sounds rather embarrassingly like a whimper when his stubble scrapes further up her neck and his mouth sucks lightly just behind her ear, she figures there's really no one in the world who can blame her for it.

But it definitely has an effect on Oliver.

He groans back, his fingers stroke along the line of her hipbone and his teeth catch at her earlobe. Her whole body is instantly on edge. It would be startling how quickly he can do this to her if he hadn't inadvertently been doing it for years. She arches further and presses back against him and oh... that is not an arrow in his pocket.

"Oliver," she gasps as his hand travels slowly up her belly to the edge of her ribs under her shirt.

She's struck by the sudden realization that she's not touching him which is absolutely totally unacceptable, but also slightly difficult to achieve given that he's pressed fully against her back. She turns in his arms until they're face-to-face and kisses him soundly, running a hand down his chest to his abs, tracing their ridges until he breaks their kiss to suck in a breath, wild and uncontrolled.

He's off kilter for a moment and she takes to opportunity to press against his shoulder until he's lying on his back and throws one leg over his hips so that she's straddling him. Her hair drapes over one
shoulder as she leans down to kiss him again and his hands can't seem to quite decide on where to settle. They start with her face, skim down her arms, drop to her thighs then wrap around the curve of her hips.

She presses her lips to the hollow of his throat and nips at his collarbone with her blunt little teeth and his hands tighten reflexively against her hips as he groans. It's her new favorite noise. Or, possibly, just her favorite noise. She's not sure she's ever had a favorite noise before. But really that's not the point. Oliver undone is absolutely her favorite thing since ever.

"You're going to kill me," he mutters, his fingers sliding down the backs of her thighs and damn it why hadn't she worn shorts to bed?

She grins up at him, her chin resting lightly on his breastbone, feeling impish and so incredibly aroused that she's actually momentarily forgotten anything beyond the confine of their bed. Er… the bed. Whatever.

"But what a way to go, right?" She asks with a raised eyebrow.

He dives his hands into her hair and surges forward to kiss her soundly. Somehow he's sitting suddenly, her still straddling him, and they're pressed chest-to-chest. It's maybe the most intimate moment she can imagine with them both fully clothed. And why is it exactly that they're both still fully clothed? That's sort of unacceptable. He's shirtless, but still… that's sort of his normal state. That doesn't count as unclothed.

She's seconds away from taking off her own shirt. Literally, her hand is on the hem. Because oh my god she wants him. Wants to feel his skin against hers, wants to know every inch of him and watch him break apart under her or over her or whatever. She doesn't even care how, she just wants. But then there's a damned knock at the door and the real world hits her like a blast of ice cold water and that just sucks.

"One minute," she shouts before groaning in frustration and kissing Oliver one last time.

He hisses and flops back onto the bed as she eases off of him and as annoying as the intrusion of the real world is, she's got to admit it's a little satisfying to know she has this much effect on him.

"Come on," she says quietly to him. "You'd think you were the one going to jail today or something."

"Don't even joke about that," he tells her, sitting up and swinging his legs over the bed as he looks at her seriously.

"Sorry," she says, meaning it. "Gallows humor. And, as much as it pains me to say this - and, believe me, it does - you should go put on some pants."

He sighs.

He sighs, but he kisses her and disappears into her bathroom.

This is for the best. Even if she has to actively remind herself of that.

She waits until the bathroom door is shut before she slips a bra on under her shirt and answers the door to find the lesser evil of the two police officers she's come to be acquainted with standing in the threshold of her sanctuary.

"Interrupting something, Ms. Smoak?" Captain Lance asks with a horribly knowing raised eyebrow.
Felicity feels sort of like she just got caught having sex by her dad. Which is ridiculous because a) she didn't actually get to have sex, much to her dismay, and b) her dad is considerably less present in her life than Captain Lance. Or virtually anyone else she knows, up to and including celebrities she's never met and the barista who always writes 'Felicia' on her coffee cup.


"Your hair is… disheveled," he says, sounding completely disbelieving.

She glances toward the mirror. Crap. She has sex hair. Again. Without having had sex. Is this just a thing he does to her now? Proximity to Oliver equals instant sex hair? That's going to be incredibly inconvenient at board meetings.

"I… haven't brushed my hair yet. It's called bedhead, Captain Judgeypants," she says defensively.

Really, her righteous indignation might have come off as more believable if Oliver hadn't chosen exactly that moment to emerge from the bathroom.

"You were saying?" Lance says, shooting her a look that screams I don't believe you and you're smarter than this all at once and she's more than a little annoyed at it.

"Do I need my lawyer, Captain?" Felicity asks.

"Not yet," Lance tells her. "But you will. And when Bryce gets here, you should probably make sure either Oliver Queen isn't in your room or you're looking more… put together. Or both. Bryce is not a dumb man and while some of us might be happy with plausible deniability, he's not. Do I make myself clear?"

"Are you?" Lance asks, head quirked to the side.

"Happy with plausible deniability," Felicity elaborates. "You've got… a whole lot more information about the Arrow than Bryce does. You've helped him. If you've thought about who he is even a little-"

"I don't want to think about who he is, Ms. Smoak," Lance says, pointedly not looking at Oliver. "And I don't want to know. Maybe this city does need the Arrow. There's been times… I don't know if we coulda made it without him. But if I'm thinkin' of him like he is, I can almost justify not slappin' a pair of cuffs on him. Cause all I see's the mask and the bow. If I start think' about him like a person, a man making life and death decisions for other people and acting outside the law, somebody who might have a family that worries about him or a girl who loves him, that's when I start to think I gotta stop him. For him. For the city. There's a reason the police have rules."

"So why are you here?" Felicity asks.

"'Cause it's my job," Lance tells her. "'Cause maybe sometimes you gotta bend the rules to do the right thing."

"You're bending the rules?" Oliver asks, edging up to Felicity's side.

Lance is far from stupid and the way he can barely stand to look at Oliver at all says a whole lot to Felicity about exactly how well the man is convincing himself he doesn't know who the Arrow is. Plausible deniability indeed.
"I might not know who the Arrow is, but I sure as hell know who he isn't," Lance tells Felicity, ignoring Oliver entirely at this point. "There's no way Merlyn's the Arrow, not just 'cause your sense is... at least marginally better than that, but 'cause it doesn't add up. Merlyn tried to take down the Glades. The Arrow tried to save it. And your people in the Glades? The ones who remember it like it was? They're startin' to point this out, share stories about the Undertaking and the Arrow speeding through the destruction, tryin' to save people. I dunno why Merlyn turned himself in, but all he did was cause confusion and buy you some time."

"Bryce has this figured out?" Felicity asks warily.

"He's got a lotta circumstantial stuff on you and a whole lot of witness statements about the Arrow, but real evidence is pretty flimsy. If he can get you to lie under oath, though..." Lance says knowingly, his voice trailing off.

"He wants to convict me on perjury charges?" Felicity asks incredulously.

"They nailed Capone for less," Lance points out. "And we both know it ain't you he really wants, kid. But he'll take what he can get and use you as bait."

"He thinks he can draw the Arrow out by getting Felicity sent to jail?" Oliver asks.

"Yeah. He does," Lance says, finally levelling Oliver with a look. "An' so do I."

"Thanks for the heads up, Captain," Felicity says, trying to break the testosterone-laden staredown between Lance and Oliver.

Words don't work. There's a weird mix of respect and dislike between Captain Lance and Oliver Queen. They've been complicated since the Queen's Gambit sank, at least. Probably before. It's not like Oliver was ever the best boyfriend to Laurel and that had to have rubbed Laurel's father the wrong way. Maybe that's the real reason Lance doesn't want to know who the Arrow is. He values the Arrow. He respects the Arrow. He doesn't want to have to feel those things toward Oliver Queen. It's much easier not to have to reconcile those things.

Felicity settles her hand on Oliver's upper arm and he blinks, looks to her. Lance does, too. Huh... that kinda makes it like she won their staredown, doesn't it? Go her!

"Laurel will be here soon. Bryce ain't gonna be too far behind her," Lance says. "You should probably wear something... different."

"Thanks for dropping by, Captain," Oliver says in a clear dismissal.

"See you in a bit," Lance responds, walking back down the hall.

"I need to have a chat with security," Oliver grumbles as he closes the door. "Police or not, Lance isn't someone who gets through my doors without me being notified right now."

"It's Monday, Oliver," Felicity points out. "There's a whole lot of people getting through your doors right now."

Oliver winces at that reminder. There are entirely too many people who work at Queen Consolidated.

"This floor is restricted," Oliver points out. "I don't want anyone but our team up here without me clearing it first."
"Fine," Felicity shrugs. "Then talk to Bruce. I'm going to go put on something less obviously pyjamas in the meantime because if I'm about to be paraded in front of the media and questioned by the police all day, I'm going to need armor in the form of the best clothes I own and really fabulous hair. And shoes. With at least three-inch heels."

"Heels are your armor?" Oliver asks with amusement.

"Hey, you have your weapons, I have mine," Felicity smiles.

He kisses her long and soft, one hand on her waist and the other curling around the back of her head, undoubtedly further ensuring she needs to substantial work in order to attain fabulous hair today. She sighs when he finally steps back. At least this is going well today, anyhow. But this isn't all there is to their day. Sadly.

He crosses the room, grabs his phone and dials Bruce while she disappears into the bathroom. The ritual of getting ready for her day is actually somewhat soothing. It gives her something to focus on, an immediate goal. By the time she's done, she looks professional and put-together. In a dark green skirt and an ivory blouse with copper colored nails and shoes. She hasn't taken time to dwell at all on the horribleness of the day ahead of her at all. But it's also killed enough time that there's someone banging on her door.

Yeah.

That's enough to bring the reality of the day back to her.

"SCPD, Ms. Smoak. Open up," calls out Bryce's booming, authoritative voice.

She walks out of the bathroom and stands a few feet from the door to the apartment, not quite able to get herself to move to open it. The way Oliver is looking at her, all mournful and longing and helpless, she hates it. That's not what today should be. Not after last night. Not after this morning.

"I want to protect you from this," he says with so much pain in his voice.

"I know," she responds. "But you don't have to. I can handle this. And you don't always get to be the one doing the protecting. We're a team, remember?"

He shakes his head with a little smile, seemingly amazed by her. He holds her hand gently and kisses her forehead cherishingly and then he lets her go to answer the door.

"Felicity Smoak," pronounces Bryce, as soon as she opens the door, Laurel and Captain Lance both standing behind him looking thoroughly unhappy. "You're under arrest for aiding and abetting and conspiracy to commit acts of vigilantism."

The whole 'right to remain silent' speech follows but she's thrown enough by hearing actual charges listed against her that she doesn't really hear it. She doesn't really hear anything but the whooshing of her own blood in her veins for a very long moment.

"If you agree to come quietly, we won't cuff you," Captain Lance speaks up after a few seconds, his words finally cutting through the pounding of her pulse.

"I'm really not all that good at being quiet," she says without thinking.

Oliver groans and the look on Laurel's face kind of screams how is this my client? Bryce is reaching for his cuffs and Felicity jolts at the sight of them.
"I'm not like… going to cause trouble, though," Felicity clarifies. "I just can't promise to stop talking. I babble. When I'm nervous. Or, well, a lot of the time when I'm not, too. But I sort of am, right now. Nervous that is. Because obviously I am. So, that whole 'right to remain silent' thing sounds lovely and all, but I'm pretty sure it's beyond me. And please don't cuff me because really that's probably just going to lead to additional babble and really terrible news headlines."

It's an awkward enough ramble that even Bryce looks sympathetic for a moment and the cuffs end up put away.

She doesn't look back at Oliver as she leaves with the others. It would be too telling, for one thing. For another, she's half convinced if she did he might hold onto her and refuse to let go.

She's also half-convinced she might let him.

Police are everywhere. Outside Queen Consolidated, blocking gawking bystanders and gossiping co-workers. But she doesn't realize quite how bad everything has gotten until they pull up in front of the police station. Bryce is clearly keen to broadcast his win by arresting her and they are instantly swarmed by the media.

It's considerably more overwhelming than last time.

She spies Roy on a nearby rooftop, masked with his bow in hand, and she thinks she sees Sara lingering in the shadows of a nearby alleyway, surveying the crowd for danger. That barely does anything to quell her nerves though. Cameras flash in her face and everyone is screaming - her name, questions, accusations. It's too much. Too much for her, for anyone, and the only thing that keeps her from a full-on panic attack is the steadying presence of Captain Lance's hand on her shoulder and reminding herself to channel her inner Moira.

But the things the media are shouting at her. They're toxic. They're horrible. And they worm their way under her skin.

"Did you know who he was before he turned himself in? Were you really willingly involved with Malcolm Merlyn?"

"How did he con you into helping him? Was it money? Sex?"

"Were you working with him on the Undertaking? Why did you help murder hundreds of innocent people?"

"Why did you and the Arrow decide to try to destroy the city's poor?"

She breaks at the last one. She can't handle it. She won't. This won't be her life. And it won't be Oliver's. Or Team Arrow's. She won't allow it.

She stops in her tracks and looks the reporter dead-on, ignoring the flash of cameras and the roar of reporters dimming to a quiet murmur.

"What in the world ever made you think there was only one Arrow?" She snaps in frustration.

There's dead silence for a very long beat. Then? The media frenzy surges, a tidal wave of manic reporters and cameramen. The cacophony of noise is unbelievable and the flashbulbs are blinding. Even though he's right next to her, Felicity can barely hear Lance scream to Bryce to get her inside as he tries to block some reporters from impeding their way.

By the time they spill into the police station, Felicity's mind is going a mile a minute. Trying to figure
out how they got her to say that, what it's implications are, how to move forward from this. Laurel is by her side staring at her in disbelief and shaking her head. Captain Lance is still outside, handling reporters. But Bryce… Bryce is right there with her and his look is disconcertingly triumphant.

"Well," he pronounces dryly. "You certainly know how to make an entrance. I'll give you that."

Chapter End Notes

Obviously, the whole Thea scene bears some resemblance to events on the show. I tried not to drag it out, but covering it to some extent was important for plot reasons. So, I hope it worked. The next chapter is *about* half done... almost, but it probably won't get posted until next weekend. Thanks for reading!
"What are you doing?" Laurel hisses toward Felicity under her breath after the fingerprinting is done and they're being ushered into the interrogation room.

"I honestly have no idea," Felicity replies back lowly.

"I need a moment with my client before we get started," Laurel says, louder this time as she looks toward Bryce.

"Yeah. I bet you do," he responds somewhat smugly.

Ugh. Felicity can't stand this guy and his stupid self-righteous face. He does leave her and Laurel alone though, telling them they have ten minutes, and even Felicity has to admit that this guy has done everything by the book so far. At least he seems to be trying to do right by the city, even if he is going about it somewhat backwards.

"This wasn't what we discussed at all," Laurel pronounces as soon as the door is shut behind Bryce.

"I know," Felicity moans, sitting down at the table and pressing her forehead against its cool metal surface.

"What were you thinking, Felicity? That 'more than one Arrow' thing opens up a whole new line of questions we haven't even considered," Laurel bites out.

"I wasn't thinking. Obviously," Felicity says, looking up at her clearly frustrated lawyer. "They just… I can't have people thinking I'm involved with Malcolm Merlyn and I refuse to have people believe that the Arrow and I worked together to try to level the Glades. I'm not a vain person. I don't need recognition for what we do. But I refuse to accept blame for the things we work to try to stop."

Laurel sighs deeply and rubs at her temples. Felicity has the definite sense that Laurel gets it. She gets it and, inconvenient as it might be, she doesn't disagree.

"Okay. So we use this," Laurel decides aloud.

"How?" Felicity asks.

"First of all, do not lie," Laurel instructs. "Decline to answer, give a half truth, redirect their questions, sure. But don't lie flat out or we're screwed. Got it?"

"Yes," Felicity says firmly. "I can do that."

"Secondly, if there's any question you aren't sure if you should answer or not, check with me first. I'm going to be right here the whole time," Laurel instructs, pulling the other chair around to Felicity's side and sitting next to her.

"I appreciate that," Felicity says honestly.

Even if they aren't terribly close, even if there's a slight awkwardness between them because of the Oliver factor, Felicity is quickly learning to respect the hell out of Laurel Lance both professionally and as a person. She is fierce and dedicated and a damned good lawyer. Sometimes they might not completely see eye-to-eye and they might be worlds apart personally, but if the current storm of crises encompassing her life has taught her anything it's that there's more to people than what
immediately meets the eye.

"Lastly, highlight what you don't know," Laurel instructs.

"This might come off wrong but… Laurel, there's not much I don't know," Felicity says blinkingly. "I mean, I wasn't in this from the beginning but for the last year and a half or so…"

"That's not what I mean," Laurel elaborates. "I mean listen to what they're saying as much as what they're asking. Keep things simple. Don't get lost in what you're saying. Think about the story you want to tell. Don't let them bait you like the reporters did. They will try to trip you up, but they will also give you opportunities. You need to use them."

"Okay," Felicity responds nervously, tapping her bronze nails against the table.

Laurel puts her hand over Felicity's to still its nervous motion and Felicity brings her other hand up to her forehead in a move that's pure anxiety.

"You're fine," Laurel says, squeezing her hand firmly and staring at her with a piercing gaze. "You'll be fine. You're smart. You can do this. You aren't going to go down for this. So stop acting guilty of something because you aren't and you need to remember that."

Surprise is probably written all over Felicity's face. She knows it. But some of what Laurel says sinks in and she feels the truth of it. There are things she's done that she could go to jail for. Certainly. But she's not guilty of what they're accusing her of here. Not really. Not like they think. And maybe, maybe her little slip in front of the reporters could be twisted to work to their advantage.

There's a sharp rap on the door but barely any pause at all before Bryce strides in, Captain Lance following shortly behind him.

"You're going to have to get more chairs, if you want to sit down," Laurel says, glaring at Bryce. He flinches and glowers in annoyance before snapping at an officer outside the door to grab them more seats. He doesn't wait for the chairs before he gets started though. He takes advantage of his position and circles the women like he's studying prey. It's really not an inapt analogy in Felicity's book.

"You have a lot to answer for, Ms. Smoak," Bryce pronounces.

Felicity watches him closely but doesn't respond because he didn't ask her a question.

"So… there's more than one Arrow," Bryce continues, stopping on the other side of the table and leaning against it with both of his hands as he stares her down.

"Was that a statement or a question, Major?" Laurel asks.

"Question," Bryce grinds out.

Laurel nods to Felicity.

"...Yes," Felicity says after a pause. "There's more than one Arrow."

"How many?" Bryce questions.

"I know of… four who've worn the hood," Felicity says.

"Who?"
"I can't answer that. It would be mostly hearsay," she says.

"How many of them wouldn't be hearsay?" Bryce asks, grabbing a chair from an officer who brings it into the room and sitting directly across from her, staring her down and ignoring Laurel.

Felicity looks to her lawyer, who gives her a little nod.

"Two," Felicity states.

"Two," Bryce repeats.

"Yes," Felicity tells him.

"Who is the other?" Bryce asks.

"I'm not going to tell you that," Felicity says quickly.

"Do we need to talk about adding obstruction of justice to your charges, Ms. Smoak?" Bryce growls at her.

"You didn't even know there was more than one Arrow," Felicity points out, the story forming in her mind as she speaks. "How in the world do you know who is guilty of what? How do you know anyone other than Merlyn is guilty of anything? I'm not going to give up the name of someone who might have put on a hood and picked up a bow to save a girl from being mugged just to watch him be hung for murdering people he never touched."

She can see Laurel smiling thinly but with great triumph from the corner of her eye and she's knows she's on the right track with this.

"All the more reason for you to give us a name so we can check it out," Bryce says.

"You have the villain," Felicity tells him. "Leave the hero alone."

"So it wasn't Merlyn you were kissing the other night?" Bryce asks her.

"God no," Felicity says with a shudder. "You can hook me up to a lie detector for that one if you want. Actually, would you? Please? I'd really like that on the record with no question about it at all. Maybe you can record it and release it to the media?"

"Have you aided the Hood - any of them - in their criminal activities against this city?" Bryce asks, picking and choosing what part of her statements he seems to be paying attention to.

"My client declines to answer that question," Laurel speaks up.

"No, Laurel. I've got this one," Felicity says, staring down Bryce.

"Felicity," Laurel says warningly, but Felicity pays no heed to her.

"The Arrow I know now has no crimes against this city," Felicity tells Bryce. "He fights for it, not against it."

"He's a damned vigilante," Bryce growls.

"He's a good samaritan," Felicity counters.
"He's just got you wrapped around his little finger, doesn't he?" Bryce asks with condescension and distaste. "You're not as stupid as this, Ms. Smoak."

"Stop badgering my client," Laurel demands. "It's unprofessional and borderline in legality."

"Fun fact. I'm not actually stupid at all," Felicity tells him with a one-shouldered shrug. "And you know that. Obviously. You've looked into me. So, tell me, Major Bryce, does it seem more likely that I've suddenly become some vapid vigilante-obsessed airhead or that you don't have this as figured out as you think you do."

"You're helping a man who kills people with a medieval weapon," Bryce insists.

"Malcolm Merlyn was putting arrows in people two years ago," Felicity tells him. "Malcolm Merlyn took out anyone who got in the way of his plans - including his fellow one-percenters - and he tried to level the Glades. I would never have helped him. He's a monster. Are you honestly telling me that you can't see a difference between the Hood of two years ago and the Arrow of today?"

"You're saying the current Arrow took over after the Undertaking," Bryce observes.

"I'm saying he is definitely not the same person today as he was in the beginning," Felicity confirms. "You're the police officer, Major Bryce. You tell me, how often does a killer de-escalate and go from killing someone at least once a week to tying up criminals and dropping them off with the cops? All I know about patterns of criminal activities I learned from Sherlock Holmes, but even I know that an M.O. doesn't generally change like that."

Bryce leans back in the chair at that, studying her. It's unsettling.

"So why is Merlyn giving himself up, then?" Bryce asks.

It's a damned good question.

"I have no idea," she says honestly. "And that scares the hell out of me. I've never worked with him. I never would work with him."

"Is he doing it for the new Arrow? Did he… hand off the hood and the bow? Declare him his successor?" Bryce asks.

"I told you. I have no idea why he's doing it," Felicity reiterates. "But that's absolutely not how the current Arrow came into being. He's not some kind of protege. They are adversaries, not allies."

"I don't believe you," Bryce tells her.

"That's inconvenient. Because everything I've told you is absolutely true," Felicity replies firmly.

"Well then," says Bryce dryly. "I hope you're more convincing in front of a jury than you are in front of me."

There is absolutely no way that Oliver Queen is going in to work today, despite the fact that he's literally living in his office building these days. Honestly, it probably would have been a good idea for him to go down a floor and at least try to get something done. It would have distracted him. Maybe. Possibly. Okay, probably not, but it could have happened.

Instead, though, he paces the length of Felicity's room like a caged beast. After a while the tension
has him anxious enough that he starts doing push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups on the doorframe to the bathroom. Basically anything that might keep him focused on something other than Felicity currently sitting in a police station being grilled by the cops because of him.

It's unfair.

It's awful.

They should still be curled up in bed with her hair tickling his chest and quiet laughter and breathy moans as they explore the new realities of their relationship together. She deserves that. They deserve that. And he hates that this has happened instead.

He turns on the television after a bit, figuring at least he can watch her there even if she's not right in front of him. Maybe he'll mute the tv to silence the horrid reporters and their foul assumptions and just focus on her. He likes that idea.

The plan goes slightly awry when he turns on the television, though.

Yes. She's on the screen. And yes, the sight of her buoys him and takes his breath away. But there's no way he's muting the reporters. Not given what they're saying.

"Starling City is stunned in the wake of Felicity Smoak's shocking revelation that there's more than one Arrow. SCPD seems to be skeptical of her claims, but at least some of the residents in the Glades say this makes complete sense to them," says a reporter Oliver doesn't even recognize before the scene cuts to a very young woman he doesn't recognize at all.

"If Malcolm Merlyn is an Arrow, he's not the only one," the girl says with absolute certainty. "The Arrow saved my life. He's saved a lot of us. He cares about the Glades. He wouldn't have tried to destroy it."

"Twenty-year-old Kelsey Prescott is just one of dozens of people who've come forward in the last hour to express their support for Ms. Smoak and the Arrow," the reporter cuts in.

"Malcolm Merlyn is everything wrong with this city," Sin's familiar voice declares as the girl's face appears on screen. "He's not the Arrow we know. Not in the Glades. The Arrow's a hero. He's got our backs when no one else does. And, I don't really know, but it seems like Felicity Smoak's got his. The cops oughta be glad they got Merlyn and leave the real Arrow and Felicity Smoak alone."

"Analysts aren't quite as convinced," the reporter says, the scene cutting back to some guy in front of a computer.

"We don't have a whole lot of footage with the Arrow on it," the guy says and Oliver tenses at the thought that there's any, even though he knows logically that there must be. "But from what we do have, he's usually got the same build, same height, same jawline."

"Usually… but not always?" the reporter questions from off camera.

"Yes, well…" the technician sighs. "That's true. We can't be sure, but there's some evidence to back up Ms. Smoak's claim."

The shot that fills the screen is a grainy black-and-white one of Digg in the hood. It's a terrible shot. You can't even discern skin tone from it with all of the shadows, but you can tell that the build is a little different, his stance is different, the way he's holding the bow is different.

The technician points all of this out and Oliver can't help but wonder if the media reaching this
conclusion is good news for them or bad.

"Next up, Dr. Forbes, noted therapist and behavioral analyst, discets the motives and actions of the Arrow. Or is that Arrows? Stay tuned for her opinion on the matter."

Oliver doesn't. That's… really more than he cares to see.

Instead, he picks up a burner phone and makes a call, grabbing his voice modulator as he does. Somewhere across town, Captain Lance steps out of Felicity's interview.

"Captain Lance," his voice rumbles.

"Gotta say. I'm a lot less surprised about hearing from you now than I woulda been about an hour ago," Lance responds.

"I want her out," Oliver continues as if Lance hadn't spoken. "Now."

"Well, that's a bit of a problem," Lance tells him. "It ain't just me this time and Major Bryce isn't about to let this go."

"He's still pressing charges?" Oliver questions.

"Yeah. No chance of that going away, I'm afraid," Lance confirms.

"Have they set bail yet?"

"That kinda thing takes time. It ain't like it is in the movies."

"Make it go faster, then," Oliver growls.

"I'll see what I can do, but bail ain't gonna come cheap. I doubt she'll be able to afford it," Lance confides.

"She won't have to," Oliver tells him. "Oliver Queen will pay it."

Lance is quiet for a moment, which isn't really surprising. This is the closest Oliver's come to confessing his identity to the man thus far.

"You know how that's gonna look, right?" Lance asks finally.

"It's going to look like Oliver Queen is in love with her," Oliver breathes back. "Which he is."

"And yet you're the one kissing her. It's gonna open up a whole new batch of questions that I'm not sure you want asked," Lance tells him.

"She doesn't belong behind bars, Captain. QC's public relations department can handle the fallout."

"I hope you're right," Lance replies.

Oliver hangs up before Lance says anything else. He's not sure he'd want to hear whatever the other man has to say.

If anyone had asked Roy Harper what his plans were for the day, visiting Malcolm Merlyn in Iron Heights with his ex-girlfriend would most definitely have not been on the list. And yet, here he was,
emptying his pockets and signing in at a prison that he's spent a rather large part of his life hoping to avoid entirely.

Whatever.

He's here for Thea.

And he's here for Felicity.

If he's gotta spend an hour or so staring down a mass murderer and actively reminding himself that he doesn't have to stay here, that's cool. He'll get through it.

Shaking off the notion that he's more than a little in love with *Malcolm Merlyn's daughter* might prove a little harder, though.

How, exactly, Thea gets access to Merlyn without a plexiglass wall between them, Roy doesn't know. Ultimately, it doesn't matter though because the two of them get ushered into the sort of room that you usually see lawyers meeting their clients in on television. And the guards leave them. Merlyn himself is cuffed with the restraints attached to the metal table in front of him. This makes Roy more comfortable. Slightly. It is Malcolm Merlyn after all.

"You shouldn't be here," is the first thing out of Merlyn's mouth as he stares Thea down, his eyes barely glancing to Roy.

Roy can't pretend to begin to understand Merlyn and Thea's relationship. But even if he and Thea aren't together right now, he still loves her and he's less than okay with the disappointment and intensity in Merlyn's eyes as he stares at her.

"Maybe not, but you sure should," Roy responds.

"Roy," Thea hisses to to the side in reproach.

"Roy," Thea hisses to to the side in reproach.

It's stupid, probably, to put himself in Merlyn's sights. But Roy is nothing if not willing to throw himself in the middle of someone who he cares about and a threat. And - whether he's Thea's father or not, whether he sacrificed himself for their benefit or not - Malcolm Merlyn is most assuredly a threat.

"Ah… the self-righteous petty crook turned ineffective sidekick," Merlyn declares, sitting back in his chair and focusing wholly on Roy. "I think we both know where you belong."

He doesn't mean prison. That's obvious enough from the darkness of his stare. He means in the ground. Roy knows it. And with the way things have been lately, with the rage that still coils in his gut and the way sleep eludes him like a mirage, he can't really say Merlyn is wrong. He's racing toward something at this point and it damn well might be his own grave. He doesn't want that… exactly. He just also isn't sure how to change course.

"Stop it," Thea orders both of them, settling down in the chair across from Merlyn.

Roy doesn't sit. He stands uneasily at Thea's side, watchful and wary.

"Of course," Merlyn responds, tilting his head to the side slightly with a bland smile as he looks to Thea. "What can I do for you?"

"You can explain to me what's going on," Thea demands. "Why didn't you tell me?"
"Ah," Merlyn notes astutely. "You're hurt. Is it because I lied to you or because he did?"

"I'm not hurt," Thea protests, which Roy suspects is only sort of true. "I'm just trying to understand why my father did all of this without telling me. You had to know I would figure it out."

"Well of course I did," Merlyn agrees. "You are a bright young woman, Thea. It was only a matter of time until all of the pieces shifted and came into focus so you could see what was going on."

"You wanted me to know," Thea deduces.

"I wanted you to know, but I wasn't going to be the one to tell you," Malcolm agrees.

"But why all of this?" Thea asks, gesturing to the prison walls around her. "Is it… Is this for me? Did you give yourself up to keep him safe for me?"

Merlyn watches her for a long moment, pale blue eyes staring into her like he's seeing straight through her. It's unsettling to Roy, but Thea seems unbothered by it. Maybe she's just used to it by now.

"It's more complicated than that," Merlyn says finally.

"Explain it to me, then," Thea demands, leaning on her forearms across the table.

"There are threats to us that you don't even know about yet, Thea," Merlyn confides. "We need to be ready. For what's coming. And it is coming. They will call you enemy just because you are of my blood. And they will use you to get to me."

"Who is this they?" Thea asks.

"It doesn't matter," Malcolm tells her.

"Um… pretty sure it does," Roy pipes up, suddenly even more on edge at Malcolm's words.

"I have no shortage of enemies," Merlyn continues as if Roy hasn't even spoken. "This place won't hold me for long. But there are forces at play in the world that you can't even imagine, Thea. And we are going to need your brother, with his secret identity intact, if we're to hope to have a chance of defeating them."

"I don't understand," Thea protests.

"You don't need to," Merlyn tells her loftily. "Just know that I have a plan."

"That's not at all comforting," Roy grumbles.

"And this plan… is it a plan to keep us safe or a plan to destroy these enemies of yours?" Thea asks.

"It's the same thing," Malcolm replies patronizingly.

"I see," Thea says. "And the us you're keeping safe. That's just you and me. Anyone else who gets in the middle. They're expendable to you, aren't they?"

"I don't have any ill-will toward your brother," Merlyn says, which is as chilling an answer as anything he could have said.

"No. You'll just use him and cast him aside," Thea accuses.
"Your brother can take care of himself," Merlyn reminds her. "And right now I'm doing him a favor."

"By falling on your sword," Thea says.

"Metaphorically," Merlyn confirms.

"And Felicity?" Thea asks.

"She's Oliver's problem," Merlyn tells her succinctly.

"Pretty sure that's not how he'd describe her," Thea responds, which Roy can't help but nod along with.

"That's because he's not capable of looking at it objectively," Merlyn tells her. "He's in love with that girl and it's going to destroy him. It already nearly did. If he were smart he'd let her hang right next to me. But he won't. He's too sentimental for that."

"How can you say that?" Thea demands. "If you think he loves her, how can you be so callous?"

"It's called self-preservation," Malcolm says, leaning across the table toward her. "No one else has any obligation to save you, Thea. Don't forget that. You have to look out for yourself first."

"Like you're sitting in jail because you're looking out for me?" Thea challenges.

"Don't kid yourself," Malcolm tells her bluntly. "I train you and protect you because I'm looking out for myself, for my legacy. You are my daughter, my blood, protecting that is it's own kind of self-preservation. My magnanimous nature doesn't extend to others."

"That's a sad way to live," Thea tells him.

"Or a realistic one," Malcolm counters. "And one I used to think your brother shared, until he started making all of these connections with other people. His bodyguard, his tech support, your ex, the Lance sisters. He's spreading himself too thin. He won't be able to protect all of them."

"That sounds like a threat," Roy bristles.


"Maybe they'll protect each other," Thea replies. "That's what they do, right? They're a team. They have each other's backs."

"And yet they are only as strong as their weakest link," Malcolm says, only shifting his gaze from Roy back to her as his words trail off.

"What have you told the police about Felicity?" Thea demands.

"Nothing," Merlyn responds.

"Nothing?" Thea asks warily.

"Nothing at all," he agrees. "Other than admitting to being the Arrow, I haven't said a word to the police."

"And when they ask you about her in the future?" Thea questions.
"You're making a mistake by concerning yourself with her," Malcolm informs her.

"Yeah. I think we're gonna have to agree to disagree on that," Thea replies.

"You don't even know her," Malcolm points out.

"Maybe not," Thea admits. "But I know Oliver. He's my blood, just like I'm yours. And if he's in love with her, then that means my concern extends to her, too."

"Your brother falls in love absurdly easily," Malcolm says dryly. "By that logic there's any number of women in this city you might make your concern."

"And Ollie's love life has always been… busy," Thea admits. "But for as much as I have always adored my brother, I have not been blind to his faults. He was a good brother before the island, but I'm not so sure he was a good person. Even when he was with Laurel, even though I know he loved her, I don't really think he was happy. I don't think he liked himself much. But now? Now is different. I'm proud of the man my brother is now and I think he is, too. Felicity's a part of that. And, even with all of the drama that's obviously a part of his life, it took all of thirty seconds in a room with the two of them to see that he's happy with her. I want that for him. So, yes, I'm making Felicity my concern."

Malcolm looks thoroughly disappointed at this. His lips press together in a thin line and he shakes his head a little in response.

"I want you to say you've never worked with her," Thea tells him. "I want you to say the only time you ever even met Felicity Smoak was as my brother's executive assistant when you went to his office. I want you to say you don't even remember her."

"That's a little at odds with me being the Arrow, all things considered. Don't you think?" Malcolm asks.

Thea hesitates, looks to Roy.

"You haven't heard yet," Thea says finally, looking back at Malcolm.

"Heard what?" Malcolm asks, obviously displeased at not knowing positively everything there is to know.

"She told the press there's more than one Arrow," Thea tells him.

The frustration on Malcolm's face is undeniable, as he's suddenly lost control over whatever his plan is with one damned statement from one girl he has no hold over.

"That was a mistake," Malcolm tells her.

"Maybe for you. Not for her," Thea counters. "She's trying to avoid jail. Self-preservation, right?"

Malcolm smirks and tips his head at her in acknowledgement, as if to say 'touché.'

"I have nothing to gain by damning Felicity Smoak," Malcolm says finally. "So I'll go along with what you want. For your sake."

"Thank you," Thea breathes with relief. "It's… they've already arrested her. Ollie's trying to call in favors, but nothing is going to do as much good as you denying involvement with her."

"Who?" Malcolm asks suddenly.
"What?" Thea asked confused.

"The favors. Who is he calling them in from?" Malcolm demands.

"Um… someone called Waller and someone called Lyssa, I think?" Thea replies.

"Nyssa," Roy corrects.

Malcolm Merlyn goes incredibly still.

"What?" Thea asks. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Merlyn replies shortly before a broad, insincere smile masks his face. "It's time for you to go. But I want you to promise me something. In return for supporting your story and protecting Felicity from the police."

"What?" Thea asks, her voice crisp and annoyed.

"Oliver's friends," Merlyn starts. "Be careful with them. And keep our true relationship to yourself, beyond those who already know."

"I'm not exactly keen to broadcast the idea that I'm the bastard daughter of a mass murderer," Thea replies dryly.

"Keep it that way," Merlyn tells her, settling back in his chair. "And while you're at it, get as far away from Starling City as you can."

"I'm not you," Thea tells him, standing. "Literally everyone in the world that I care about is in this city. I'm not running and leaving them to fend for themselves."

"You will," Malcolm predicts.

His voice is cold and absolute. It sends chills down Roy's spine and, not for the first time, he finds himself wishing that Thea's father were anyone in the world other than Malcolm Merlyn. He can't do anything about that, though. What he can do something about? Getting her away from him. At least for now.

"Come on," Roy tells Thea, laying a hand on her arm. "We've been gone almost an hour. We should get back. Get an update."

"See you soon," Merlyn tells Thea gravely as she and Roy leave.

His parting words are less than comforting.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

The next chapter might take more than my usual week to write due to both real life and the length/complexity of the chapter (unless it gets split into two chapters, which might happen). I'm still aiming for next Sunday, but I think the weekend after is more likely, honestly. I want to give a huge thank you to everyone reading this story. I'm pretty amazed by its reception and the welcoming, supportive nature of this fandom. Whether you comment or not, thank you for reading.

"Are you out of your mind?"

Despite her tone, Oliver relaxes for the first time in hours when Felicity strides through the door to her QC apartment with Sara and Laurel following closely behind her.

"You're okay," he says, mostly to himself, with a sigh of relief, wrapping his arms around her and kissing the top of her head.

"Oliver," she chastises lightly, placing her hands on his chest and pulling back slightly. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I couldn't stand the idea of you in jail and that paying your bail was an easy choice to make," he tells her, his hands skimming up and down her arms, like he's trying to remind himself that she's really there, she's really okay.

She wants to argue her point. She wants to tell him that he's inviting problems and she can deal with a few days in jail if she has to to save the rest of them. But he's touching her like he can't stop and he's telling her there was no choice to make and it steals the words right off of her lips.

"You were supposed to keep your distance from her," Laurel reminds him, as she is not currently suffering Felicity's odd bout of wordlessness. "Publicly, anyhow. The media is going to catch wind of this and then… Ollie, I don't have to tell you what happens then."

"I'm done catering to the media," Oliver announces, his hand settling finally on the small of Felicity's back in a very telling way. "If we let them control this, Felicity would be sitting in prison and I wouldn't even be able to contact her. I'm not willing to do that. We need a new plan."

"We might have one," Sara pipes up. "As off-the-cuff as it might have been, this multiple Arrow story works to our advantage."

"It does, at the very least, create confusion," Laurel acknowledges. "We can use that."

"Where are Roy and Thea?" Sara asks. "They should be here for this."

"Thea?" Laurel asks with surprise.
"Yeah… she followed Merlyn back to town," Oliver says with a grimace. "She and Roy are having a chat with him now."

"In prison?" Laurel asks, stunned.

"We need to know his agenda," Oliver says by way of agreement. "Thea's the only one who might be able to get it out of him."

"I've got to be honest, Ollie," Laurel says. "I'm a little shocked that you'd let her go anywhere near him. Or a prison."

"Roy's with her," Oliver responds tightly.

The look of surprise on Laurel's face doesn't diminish, but they do move on.

"So how are we dealing with the media, then?" Sara asks. "Their confusion is an opportunity but we need to jump on it. Immediately. Before they come to their own conclusions without us."

"I… gave an interview yesterday," Oliver says, shifting uncomfortably as he speaks.

"You did what?" Felicity asks in surprise.

"As the Arrow," Oliver admits, wincing a little at the incredulous looks from all three women in the room. "I broke the camera, but the microphone still worked."

"Please… please tell me you used the voice modulator," Laurel begs.

"Of course," Oliver says like it's obvious.

"You don't get to use that tone right now, Oliver," Laurel snaps. "I can't stand here and assume you're making sound choices when you're proving time and time again that you aren't thinking clearly about this."

"What did you say?" Felicity asks, looking up at him apprehensively.

"I… told her they're asking the wrong questions. I told her you don't deserve any of what's happening to you right now," Oliver replies, his gaze tracing her face. "I told her they should be focused on how we can save the city and that the Arrow's attention needs to be on that. He doesn't have time for personal attachments. And I told her your relationship with Oliver Queen isn't any of the Arrow's business."

She stares back like she's not sure what to make of all of that. Laurel and Sara, however, seem to have no such problem.

"You're publicly backing off as the Arrow so that you can be with her as Oliver," Sara observes.

"Yes," Oliver confirms, never shifting his gaze from Felicity.

"Not right away," Laurel tells him. "You do realize that, right? It's been two days, Oliver."

"I can't be with her publicly, yet," Oliver agrees. "But that doesn't mean I have to hide how I feel about her publicly, either."

Felicity's breath catches a little at that. Him saying he wants something real with her, that he wasn't willing to hide it, that had been one thing. But hearing him say this to Laurel. That's another thing entirely.
The air is weird, heavy. Felicity can't interpret the silent communication going on between Laurel and Oliver. There's a lot of layers to it and most of it isn't her business. That's okay. There's history there she'll never fully understand, wouldn't want to, really.

"It works," Sara acknowledges after a beat of awkward silence. "You're swooping in to save her. Everybody seems to love a knight in shining armor. For some reason."

"The media will eat it up," Laurel agrees. "Turn it into some modern day fairytale. You should talk to Pamela about this. Soon."

"I plan to," Oliver replies.

"I sort of hate the idea of being seen as the damsel in distress," Felicity confesses. "Which is how they'll portray me, at best."

"You'd hate being linked to Malcolm Merlyn more," Sara points out, her tone disturbingly chipper considering the subject.

"This is true," Felicity acknowledges hesitantly.

"We aren't a fairytale. We're better than that. We're partners," Oliver tells her, his thumb stroking along her spine. "People will see that. Eventually. We'll make them."

Yeah. That might be enough to make her melt a little. She's only human, after all.

"Smooth," says Thea from the doorway with a rather spectacular smirk. "That was impressive. Was he always that smooth?"

"No," says Sara with a snort.

"Definitely not," Laurel chimes in, shaking her head.

"Hey!" Says Oliver looking a little affronted.

"Please," Laurel says with a disbelieving raise of her eyebrow. "I remember the time in senior year where you literally said to me 'I got a new car. Want to see the back seat of it?'"

Oliver winces and shuffles awkwardly, which is so ill-suited to him that Felicity cannot hold back laughing.

"Oh I am so glad I didn't know you back then," she tells him, patting his arm.

"Me too," Oliver says under his breath before clearing his throat and speaking up. "Can we… possibly get back to current events instead of ancient history?"

"For now," Thea says loftily. "But I feel a need for a girl's night. Soon."

"That's…" Oliver starts, blinking toward his sister.

"A brilliant idea?" She completes. "A bonding experience? A much-needed team building exercise?"

"I was going to say terrifying," he responds, looking to Roy for back-up because clearly he's the only one in the room who might support him in this particular thing.

The other man just shakes his head. Traitor. Oliver wishes Digg were here. He'd be incredibly useful about now.
"Terrifying… brilliant… same thing," Thea says, waving off his concerns with a dismissive gesture.

"What did Merlyn say?" Oliver asks, moving back to their more immediate concerns.

"A whole lot of vague double-talk mostly," Roy says.

"Not… entirely," Thea corrects him. "You just have to know how to read him."

"And?" Oliver asks impatiently.

"And he's going to back up that he doesn't know Felicity," Thea tells him. "He's far from happy about it, though."

"Yeah, he also made loads of thinly veiled threats and ominous warnings," Roy points out.

"Threats against who?" Oliver demands.

"It's nothing, Ollie," Thea says, rolling her eyes. "It's just Malcolm being Malcolm."

"Thea, believe me when I say there is absolutely nothing comforting about that statement," Oliver tells her gravely.

"He wasn't specific," Roy answers. "Lots of talk about enemies coming after him and using Thea to do it. He said he had a plan. He said he needed your identity as the Arrow uncompromised for it."

"Is anyone okay with that? Because I am not okay with that," Felicity says tensely.

"I think… I don't know, but I think whatever he was planning, this whole media thing threw a wrench in his plans," Thea tells her. "He's been preparing for something for months. But now, he's reacting instead of starting things in motion. I don't think it sits easily with him."

"So which is more unsettling? Malcolm Merlyn with a plan or without one?" Felicity asks, looking up at Oliver.

"That's tomorrow's problem," Oliver says grimly. "For now, he's behind bars and we have more pressing issues."

"How were the police?" Thea asks Felicity.

"Very police-like," she replies. "They have more questions than answers right now, which is good for us but also makes them testy. Bryce is dead-set on finding out the identities of everyone who has ever worn the hood."

"Felicity handled it well," Laurel tells them. "I'm going to go to the D.A. tomorrow. I doubt I can get him to drop the charges for aiding and abetting, but the conspiracy charges might be something we can make go away."

"Good," Oliver says crisply. "That's a start. We should-" His voice is cut off suddenly by the shrill chirp of a phone. Oliver pulls his cell out of his pocket, clearly about to dismiss the call, but when he sees who it is, he answers it instead.

"Hey," he says casually. "Everything okay?"

Felicity watches with curiosity as he listens to the caller, a big smile taking over his face.
"That's fantastic," he says with the first genuine lightness she's heard in his voice in days. "So how many unbroken bones do you have left in your hand?"

'Digg?' Felicity mouths at him, gripping his forearm tightly.

Oliver nods in response. Felicity practically bounces on the balls of her feet waiting for him to relay information. Or pass her the phone. One of the two. Preferably immediately.

"Hold on a sec, man," Oliver says with amusement. "I've got a room full of people here who really want to know what you're saying."

"Well?" Asks Laurel.

"Six pounds twelve ounces and a very good set of lungs," Oliver tells them. "Lyla's fine but exhausted. Digg's hand is unbroken."

The little squeal of excitement that Felicity gives is utterly adorable. To Oliver, anyhow.

"They pick a name?" Sara asks.

"Hope," Oliver tells her. "Hope Diggle."

"I need the phone," Felicity tells him, holding out her hand. "Please? Pretty please with wifi on top?"

"That doesn't even make sense," Sara boggles at her.

But, Oliver hands Felicity the phone with a chuckle and watches as she wanders off across the room, all excitement and joy as she chatters at Digg. Her face is bright and happy and he can't look away. He wonders how he ever did.

"Oh, wow, do you have it bad," Thea says with a laugh, drawing his attention back to the rest of the group.

"Digg's gonna text pictures as soon as he hangs up," Oliver says, instead of answering.

"Yeah. Okay, that's why you're staring longing over there. It's that you're waiting for baby pictures," Thea snorts.

"The longing looks aren't new," Roy tells Thea. "Them doing something about it is."

"Finally," Sara says dramatically.

"Can we… talk about anything else?" Oliver requests.

"Nah," Thea says with a smug look. "I like this. This is good."

The look Oliver fixes her with is less than amused.

"Hey, hold on a second, Digg," Felicity says, pulling the phone away from her ear for a second and looking at the screen for a second. "Oliver's got a call from security. I'm putting you on hold."

Oliver reaches for the phone as she walks the few steps back over to him and he answers it immediately as soon as it's in hand.

"Bruce, what's the situation?" Oliver asks immediately instead of offering a greeting.
The tense look on his face relaxes some, though, as the man on the other end of the line speaks.

"Good," Oliver says with a breath of relief. "Send them on up. Thank you."

He hangs up and hands the phone back to Felicity.

"The ARGUS people are finally here. They're on their way up now," he tells her.

"Better late than never," Felicity smiles, switching the phone back over to Digg's call.

"Hey, tell him to hold on a second," Oliver requests.

"I'm back, but give me a second, Digg," Felicity says into the phone before pulling it away from her ear and looking to Oliver.

"Now that ARGUS is here, I'm going to go downstairs and have a chat with Pamela," Oliver tells her, skimming one hand down her arm while the other tucks some hair behind her ear. "You can hang onto my phone, keep talking with Digg. I'll take the burner with me instead."

"Okay. Thanks," she replies with a smile, rising up onto her toes to kiss him.

If they linger slightly longer than is probably appropriate, given their company, then that's just too bad. But, given the vague noise of disgust from Roy, Oliver is pretty sure the other man is not wholly in agreement.

"Give me the phone," Roy says, taking it from Felicity's lax fingers.

"I want that back after you're finished. I'm not done talking to Digg," Felicity tells him insistently.

"Yeah, you'd better believe you're not," Roy snorts back at her before putting the phone to his ear. "So, congrats on the baby thing. Just so you're aware, you missed Oliver pulling his head out of his ass. He and Felicity are kind of nauseating, now. You'll want to remember to knock really loudly before entering rooms. Trust me on this."

"Roy!" Felicity protests, blushing fiercely.

"Am I wrong?" He asks her challengingly.

"I mean… no," Felicity says, still pink-cheeked. "Knocking is good. I'm a fan of the knocking."

"Believe me. After this morning? I am, too," Roy deadpans.

"I'm gonna go," Oliver says, kissing Felicity's temple one more time. "I'll be back in an hour or two."

"I'll walk out with you," Thea tells him unexpectedly. "I'm gonna go pick us up some lunch. Thai okay?"

"Felicity's allergic to nuts," Oliver says immediately.

"That makes Thai hard," Thea muses. "Sushi?"

"That sounds really good," Laurel agrees.

"Okay. I'll be back soon. Come on, big bro," Thea says, looping her arm through Oliver's.

They're closed in the elevator before Thea lets go of his arm. It's been awhile since he's seen his sister
look this happy and while it's somewhat unexpected, maybe it shouldn't be. She's always wanted the best for him, always wanted him to be happy, even when he didn't think he deserved it. Maybe especially then.

"I like her, Ollie," Thea says finally, looking up at him with approval.

"Yeah," he replies, biting back a small but delighted smile. "Me too."

"An hour and forty-seven minutes. That's an improvement, I'll give you that," Pamela says in place of a greeting as Oliver steps foot into her office.

"You couldn't be my first call," Oliver tells her. "Not for this."

"Well… at least I made the list, finally," Pamela responds, leaning back in her chair and eyeing him in a calculated way. "And ranked a personal visit, no less."

"This is about more than Felicity's bail," he tells her.

"Yes… I did sort of suspect that," Pamela replies.

She gets up, moves around her desk and clears off the other chair, which had been somewhat covered in binders. For such an incredibly detail-oriented woman, Pamela's office is an utter disaster. There's paper everywhere, files, newspaper clippings, magazines. She's got shelves of old-school VHS tapes on a bookshelf next to rows and rows of outdated books on AP Style and media relations. There are two Regan-era televisions on the wall, both on but muted, with newscasters he vaguely recognizes spewing the stories of the day. Oliver's not sure if he needs to get Pamela a bigger office or just suggest she hire a few interns to help sort things out. But he's got bigger things to concern himself with right now than the possible fire hazard that is Pamela's office.

"Have a seat," she says, gesturing to the chair before heading back to hers. "How's Felicity doing?"

Oliver's a little surprised that's Pamela's first question to him. She seems genuine about it, too, which is nice. But then, Felicity has a way of endearing herself to people.

"She'll be okay, I think," Oliver tells her. "Now that she's not in jail. I'll make sure to tell her you asked."

Pamela nods at that, long and steadily, her thin lips pursed oddly and her brow furrowed even more than usual.

"So… the bail," Pamela finally prods after a moment.

"I paid it," Oliver tells her immediately.

"I had little doubt of that," Pamela replies, eyebrows raised. "And neither will anyone else once they hear how much it was."

"I know," Oliver responds. "That's why I'm here."

"Well, it looks like something I said sunk in then. I'm counting that as a win, anyhow," Pamela says with a short laugh.

"I learned the hard way to use all of the resources at my disposal," Oliver tells her bluntly.
"You know, I have to be honest. I expected some PR disasters when you took over as CEO," Pamela tells him. "This, though? This I didn't expect. Executives screwing around with their assistants are a dime a dozen. Not many actually fall in love with them."

"It's not like that," Oliver protests, annoyed on Felicity's behalf. "The only reason she's my assistant in the first place was that I needed someone I could trust watching my back. She's way too qualified to be my assistant. But I don't trust easily these days and I know I can rely on her. For anything."

Pamela hums at that as she mulls it over, flips a pen back and forth between her fingers so that it drums along her desk. It's absurdly annoying.

"So you were involved before she became your assistant?" Pamela asks finally.

"No," Oliver tells her. "We were friends before she was my assistant. I spent… a lot of time and effort trying to stay away from her. That's only crumbled in the last few days."

"Since the pictures with the Hood?" Pamela asks.

"Yes," Oliver agrees.

"Why were you keeping your distance before then?" Pamela questions.

"Because… I'm not sure I can be the man she deserves," Oliver says with great annoyance.

Pamela snorts at that.

"Bullshit," she tells him. "You're a multi-billionaire with your own global company and you look liked you just walked off the cover of GQ - which, by the way, is something we should do at some point."

"I also spent years marooned on an island fighting every single day for my survival," he points out. "That kind of experience doesn't leave you unchanged."

"And thank God for that," Pamela tells him firmly. "The kid who pissed on cops and went through supermodels like tissue paper would not have been good for this company or for Ms. Smoak. We're all lucky you aren't him anymore."

Oliver doesn't know how to respond to that so he doesn't.

"Look, Oliver, there's a lot of moving parts to this media problem," Pamela says after a moment. "It's sexy. Reporters aren't going to drop it. They want to know who the Hood is. Or, well, who the Hoods are, I guess. If you let anyone know about your relationship with Felicity, that just makes the story more attractive, more scandalous. I don't have to tell you how the media will spin that, do I?"

She doesn't. He knows. But she keeps talking anyhow and Oliver has never wanted so badly to hit someone who really doesn't deserve it.

"They'll call her a gold-digger. They'll call her a cheat and a whore. They'll reduce her down to some vapid two-dimensional character that's practically property being warred over by two powerful men," Pamela tells him.

"They don't get to do that," Oliver manages after a moment through gritted teeth, holding onto the arms of his chair with white knuckles to keep from hitting something at the very thought.
"So we don't let them," Pamela tells him. "That's what I'm here for. We need to stop letting them break the stories they think they know and start feeding them the stories we want them to tell."

"How do we do that?" Oliver asks.

Pamela sighs as she studies him before turning and sifting through a pile of papers to find a blank notebook and a pen.

"I want you to not react at all to what I'm about to say, okay?" She asks him, glancing over at him. "Because I don't want to know to truth of it. That part doesn't matter."

"Okay…" Oliver says warily.

"There are two ways the media might run this story. They might pit you against the Hood, turn you into romantic adversaries vying for the attention of the same woman. Or… or they might start to wonder if you're actually the same person," Pamela says, looking down at her pen instead of him as she speaks. "So what I need to know, Mr. Queen, is what story you want told."

It's probably a good thing she wasn't looking at him when she spoke because while part of him knew that people surely had to be starting to think along these lines, it was an entirely different thing to hear it actually voiced. And when Pamela finally looks back at him, her eyes are so piercing, so knowing, he has no doubt that she knows the truth. She just doesn't want it confirmed. And, wow, is he grateful for that.

"I'm not looking to go public with my relationship with her yet," Oliver starts off, because that's the easiest part of all of this. "Maybe in a few months, but I'm aware that the timing of all of this makes it… problematic."

"Good," Pamela tells him.

"As for the rest…" Oliver starts, thinking it through from different angles. "The Arrow has saved her. More than once. The kind of thing creates bonds between people. They aren't… involved."

"Oliver, that's… not going to be an easy sell," Pamela tells him. "Maybe immediately after the story hit we could have run with that, but now…"

"There was a kid who grabbed her Friday night. It's on the QC surveillance tapes," Oliver cuts her off. "It looks worse than it was. The kid was desperate to get word to me about some people my mother put in Glades Memorial who can't afford medical care."

"That's why you made the donation," Pamela comments, jotting something down in her notebook.

"It's my responsibility to right my parents' wrongs, to repair my family name," Oliver agrees. "The kid had a point, even if he went about it in the worst possible way. He's lucky he didn't get an arrow in him because it looked like Felicity was in danger and somehow the Arrow got wind of that."

"So he showed up and saved her from this kid?" Pamela asks.

"He tried to," Oliver says. "But Felicity had already saved herself, talked the kid out of violence and agreed to make his case to me for him. He let her go."

"I don't suppose she filed a police report about the kidnapping?" Pamela asks, already knowing the answer.

"She doesn't want him in trouble," Oliver replies.
"That's unfortunate," Pamela says. "But workable. The Arrow, or the Arrows, have saved her more than once. She'd just gotten out of a dangerous situation, adrenaline was high and the moment got away from her. It's pretty obvious from the interview he gave yesterday that one of the Arrows harbors some feelings for her but he's unwilling to live a life beyond his mission. So the story is this - the media has blown this out of proportion. Felicity is protecting the Arrow's identities now because they've protected her in the past. She's grateful. She had a moment with one, admittedly, but that's all."

"Bryce won't buy that," Oliver tells her.

"The police are another problem. I'll leave them to Ms. Lance," Pamela tells him. "The media, however, is my domain. I'll handle the press. With pleasure. Not just because it's my job and I like a challenge, but because I like Miss Smoak and I don't like the press crucifying women based on their perceived sex lives. It's disgusting."

"Glad we're on the same page, then," Oliver replies.

But Pamela isn't looking at him. She's looking past him. And the look on her face… it's startling. He turns to follow her gaze and finds the televisions on the wall behind him are plastered with Malcolm Merlyn's face and a breaking news bar at the bottom.

Pamela unmutes one of the televisions and Oliver tenses instantly at the newscaster's words that follow.

"We received word just moments ago that alleged vigilante mastermind and mass murderer Malcolm Merlyn has escaped from Iron Heights prison where he was awaiting trial," says the reporter. "Starling City Police have a citywide manhunt underway for the one-time billionaire business-tycoon and warn that, if spotted, citizens are advised to immediately call 911 as he should be considered highly dangerous."

"This is a problem," Pamela says. "This is the story, now. We won't be able to take control of the media until this dies down. And the longer public opinion sits the harder it will be to change."

"Can we tie it together somehow?" Oliver asks.


Oliver doesn't get a chance to respond though, because his attention is suddenly, dramatically pulled back to the television.

There's static for a second, the white noise that goes along with the lack of a signal. While only one screen is unmuted, both of them show snowy screens of black and white pixels.

Until they don't.

It's not the reporters' faces on the screens. Nor is it Malcolm Merlyn's.

It's Felicity's. In a live feed. Her eyes full of fear and a gun to her temple.

Oliver's standing before he even realizes it, a few paces in front of the television, his eyes locked onto Felicity's terrified face.

"This is a message to the Arrow," says a voice from off-camera that Oliver instantly recognizes as Chien Na Wei. "We have Ms. Smoak and her friends."
The camera pans to show Laurel on the floor, tear tracks running down her face and Sara's unmov ing form sprawled across her lap. But Laurel's focus isn't on Sara. It's on Roy. There's a wad of dark red cloth - his ever-present hoodie, Oliver realizes absently - balled up in Laurel's hands and pressed firmly to the younger man's abdomen. The color of his signature jacket is different now. Blood is sopping through the fabric at an alarming rate, turning it darker even as Roy turns unnaturally pale.

"You'll find us where you met the Bronze Tiger. You have half an hour before I start putting more holes in them, starting with your girlfriend."

Oliver doesn't even bother saying anything to Pamela before running out of the room.
Chapter 14

The elevator is way too damn slow, but even Oliver can't scale the stairs between Pamela's office and the penthouse apartments faster on foot than in the elevator, so he curses the damn thing's leisurely nature but takes it anyhow.

He doesn't have time to run by the lair, not with the timeframe given by Chien Na Wei, not with Felicity's life on the line. And Sara's and Laurel's and Roy's. But he does need the suit. And the bow. Luckily, he has spares of both upstairs.

Security is noticeably absent, but Oliver doesn't have time to worry about what exactly happened right now. There will be time for that later. Hopefully. He's got enough to deal with at the moment.

The elevator chimes, announcing its arrival and Oliver bolts from the thing the second the doors slide open, but the sight of the hall stops him in his tracks. It's a mess. The door to Felicity's apartment is wide open and the evidence of a struggle is everywhere. Shards of broken glass and splintered wood litter the floor. There's blood, too. One disturbingly large pool of it with a trail leading down the hall. He wants to wretch at this. He was here. He was here. A few floors down. They had to have passed him on the damned elevator.

"Ollie?" Asks a broken little voice as he presses his palms to his forehead.

He turns at the unexpected voice and finds Thea a few steps inside Felicity's apartment, whole and unharmed and here but shaking with white knuckled fingers clutching a to-go bag from the Japanese restaurant down the street. There is this, anyhow. She's here. She's safe. They didn't get her.

"Are you okay?" He asks, even though he can see the answer is simultaneously yes and no.

He can't help it. His large hands rest on her small shoulders and she crumbles against it, folding into his arms like she did when she was a little girl. It socks him in the gut, his need to protect her. From this. From everything. She's been through too much already.

"Is Roy gonna…?" She starts to ask into his shirt, but she can't finish the sentence.

"He's been in worse spots than this," Oliver tells her, which is disturbingly probably true. "We need to get you to safety. The woman who has them is Chien Na Wei. She's Chinese Triad and she knows who I am. If she finds you…"

"She won't," interrupts the grating voice of Malcolm Merlyn.

That he got onto the penthouse floors of QC undetected is a sign both to how much security is compromised at the moment and how thoroughly distracted Oliver is.

He looks at his watch. Twenty-six minutes and counting. Options are few and time is running out.

"You can help him," Thea announces, looking from Merlyn to Oliver and back. "Ollie's going to go after them. I know he will. But he shouldn't do it alone. You can fight. You can help him save Roy and the others."

"I could," Malcolm tells her. "But I won't."

"Why not? He's my brother and he's going after organized crime to save my boyfriend who got stabbed and kidnapped," Thea insists.
"Because leaving you unprotected is not an option," Malcolm tells her. "For either of us. I would like very much to see Chien Na Wei in the ground and I'd be happy to put her there, but not at the expense of you."

"So I'll go to the police station. Stay there while you two go off and play hero," Thea insists.

"The police can't keep you safe. They can't even keep me contained," Merlyn points out.

"The timing of your escape is... quite the coincidence," Oliver points out.

"On the contrary," Merlyn tells him. "It's anything but a coincidence. But there are few things in this world that scare me and the Triad isn't one of them."

"What is?" Thea demands. "If not them, then what?"

"Demons," Merlyn tells her gravely, which makes zero sense to Thea, but confirms a lot that Oliver had been quietly suspecting.


"No!" Thea protests. "Ollie, I'm not leaving when you're running straight into danger and Roy's bleeding out on the floor of some warehouse somewhere."

"Thea," Oliver says, settling his hands on her shoulders heavily again. "You need to trust me on this. I run into danger every night and this isn't the first time Roy's been hurt doing what we do. But I can't focus on saving them if I'm worried about keeping you safe."

"But Malcolm can help you! He's a really good fighter and you need someone at your side," Thea argues.

"Not someone I can't trust," Oliver tells her, looking at Merlyn as he speaks.

"But you'll trust him with me?" Thea asks. "With my safety? How does that make any sense?"

"I trust him to have your back. I don't trust him to have mine," Oliver replies. "And I definitely don't trust him to save Felicity and Roy and the others. They aren't important to him."

The small nod that Merlyn offers him is one of both admission and possibly respect. It's more than a little disgusting to Oliver. He doesn't want to send Thea off with Malcolm Merlyn. But it's the lesser of two evils right now.

He'll worry about the fallout later.

"You can't go after them alone," Thea insists in a last token protest.

"I won't be alone," Oliver responds, kissing her on the top of her head. "I promise. Now go."

He pointedly doesn't watch Thea's teary face as Malcolm leads her away. He doesn't have time for that. Not now. He has twenty-three minutes and no time to spare.

He changes into his spare suit as fast as humanly possible and makes a phone call as he does, his burner phone on speaker.

"I was wondering when I'd hear from you," is the first thing the voice says when his call is answered.
“What the hell are you playing at, Waller?” Oliver growls. "If you've-"

"Despite what you seem to think, Mr. Queen, I have priorities other than you," Waller interrupts. "This wasn't me. And it wasn't ARGUS."

"But your men showed up just before this happened and now they're nowhere to be seen," Oliver argues.

"Except that they didn't," Waller tells him. "My men were never sent."

"You said-" Oliver starts.

"You're only important to me when you're useful, Mr. Queen," Waller tells him. "And your assistant isn't useful to me at all. My men had a situation in East Timor that required their immediate action. I never sent anyone to you."

"But someone - presumably someone in the Triad - knew enough to know we were expecting your men," Oliver tells her.

"Yes," Waller confirms. "Which is now my problem. You, it seems, have other immediate concerns."

"Do you have anyone in Starling?" Oliver asks her.

"No," Waller tells him and Oliver hisses in distaste at the answer.

His options for backup are evaporating quickly. He doesn't even say goodbye before hanging up. He doesn't really have the time.

He grabs his bow as he dials again and heads toward the elevator. Normally, he'd be wary of being seen in his own building as the Arrow in the middle of a work day, but he doesn't have time for his normal level of caution today. Not now. Luckily, it works out and he sees no one as he heads down to the parking garage. Also luckily, the burner phone has absurdly good reception and his call goes through even in the elevator.

"Where the hell are they?" Asks Captain Lance frantically as soon as their call connects.

"The loading docks near the wharf where you first encountered me fighting the Triad when FEMA medical supplies were being stolen last year," Oliver tells him, his voice garbled by his usual modulator.

"You're going after them?" Lance asks, the shuffle of moment accompanying his voice.

"Yes," Oliver confirms. "Just as you are, I presume."

"That psychopath has both of my girls," Lance tells him firmly. "You bet your bow I'm goin' after them."

"Good," Oliver tells him. "I'm somewhat lacking in backup right now, as you might imagine."

"I ain't comin' alone," Lance replies.

Oliver isn't sure if that's meant to be comforting or a warning.

"Bryce," he grits out.
"Couldn't ditch him if I wanted to," Lance responds. "And I don't want to. He's a damned good cop."

"It's fine," Oliver manages, trying to mean it. "Saving them takes priority. We'll deal with the rest later. Don't rush the building without me. She's waiting for me. If she sees you first, things might go sideways."

The grumble from Lance is proof enough that he doesn't like this reality, but he doesn't argue with it either. Clearly, he's aware of just how dangerous the Triad really is.

"I'll do what I can," Lance offers. "But if that clock ticks down, I'll do whatever it takes to save my girls."

"I wouldn't expect anything less," Oliver tells him. "I'm ten minutes out."

"I'll be there in nine," Lance promises before disconnecting the line.

There's one very startled Queen Consolidated employee that spots the Arrow as he strides through the parking garage to his Ducati. But Oliver pays the person absolutely no attention whatsoever and she scurries off very, very quickly.

Straddling the bike, Oliver makes one last call before heading off to the wharf. It's one he doesn't bother masking his voice for.

"Are you kidding me?" Digg answers. "I was talking to Felicity and then all hell broke loose and the line cut off. We've gotta be more consistent on what burner phones we use 'cause I've been trying to figure out how the hell to get ahold of you for ten damned minutes."

"We do. We will. That was an oversight," Oliver says, a knot welling up in his throat as he speaks. "I can't lose her. We've got to get them back, Digg"

"Damn right we do," Digg tells him firmly.

"Do you know where they are? Do you remember?" Oliver asks.

"Already on my way," Digg confirms.

"So's Lance," Oliver tells him. "And he's bringing company."

"Thanks for the head's up," Digg says. "I'll meet you there."

"East side of the building. In the alley," Oliver tells him. "I'll see you there in eight minutes."

"From QC? Man that's at least a twelve minute drive. As your driver, I promise you that," Digg tells him.

Oliver doesn't answer, just hangs up instead. Maybe it should take longer, but he's not exactly planning on stopping for red lights.

By some stroke of uncharacteristically good luck, the media entirely misses the Arrow on his motorcycle peeling out of the Queen Consolidated parking garage in the middle of the day. And
thank goodness for that. They have enough problems as it is.

The next eight minutes of Oliver's life are a blur of honking horns and traffic lights that he pays no attention to. And, yes, he does make it in eight minutes. Digg, however, makes it in six.

"You're lucky you aren't a smear on the pavement, man," Digg says as Oliver dismounts his bike.

"Lance here yet?" Oliver asks, ignoring the beratement and looking around.

Digg doesn't even have time to answer before a pair of police cars pull up, silent but with lights flashing.

"Pull your hood lower," Digg tells Oliver. "It's the middle of the day and it's not even cloudy."

Oliver does, but he's not sure how much good that's really going to do. Regardless, he's not about to wait around to find out. Lance might make for decent backup, but he's not sure about Bryce and he surely doesn't want the SCPD taking control of the situation. He can see how that would play out. And it's not good.

"Circle around the back," Oliver tells Digg. "Stay out of sight. Stealth over swiftness."

"Yeah, I got it," Digg answers. "How are you getting in?"

"The front," Oliver tells him, to Digg's surprise.

"Oliver, that's-" Digg starts.

"We don't have time for this," Oliver interrupts impatiently. "This is Felicity. And Sara and Laurel and Roy. I'm not losing any of them. No matter what that means. I'll play by Chien Na Wei's rules for now. You're my trump card. Now go."

Digg looks displeased, but he doesn't argue. He grips Oliver's shoulder in solidarity instead and disappears down the alleyway with his gun drawn.

Lance and Bryce might be the first cops on scene, but they aren't the only ones. Three more cop cars are pulling around the corner and Oliver finds himself wondering if calling Lance wasn't a terrible idea. The police complicate things. And he's not sure Felicity and the others are any safer for their presence.

Bryce spots him, his eyes widening and his hand settling on his sidearm instinctively. But he seems unsure of what, exactly, to do, given the situation. Oliver isn't about to let that opportunity slip by. He tilts his head respectfully in Bryce's direction before heading toward the corner that leads to the loading dock.

"Wait," Lance shouts. "You can't just walk in there."

"I can," Oliver replies with the deep, rumbly tones of the voice modulator. "And I will. They want me. They can have me. As long as it gets everyone else out."

"You aren't a negotiator," Bryce tells him. "What's to keep them from just killing the hostages once they have you?"

"Me," Oliver growls.

"I can't let you do that," Bryce tells him. "Vigilante or not, you're a civilian."
"Major," Oliver tells him, "you can't stop me."

And he can't.

Oliver's around the corner before the police have a chance to react.

On the upside, the loading dock is fairly dark. Trucks and high walls on three sides cast heavy shadows, cloaking his face far better than the harsh glare of daylight. On the downside… there's everything else.

The Triad is out in force. There are at least two dozen men that he can see and who knows how many more that he can't. His friends are in the middle of the space, unobscured by trucks or walls or anything else. Roy is barely conscious and probably wishing he weren't, Laurel still tending to him. Sara's still out, but Oliver can see the steady rise and fall of her chest and there's no wound he can see. That's something, anyhow.

Then there's Felicity.

She's a few paces away from the others next to a video camera on a tripod, pointed right at him. There's a man holding a gun to her temple and Chien Na Wei dragging the flat edge of a knife down her bare arm. It takes every ounce of control Oliver has not to draw his bow. The need to save her is overwhelming, gives him tunnel vision, but there are two dozen men. All of them armed. All of them ready to kill him and her and their friends if he so much as twitches the wrong way.

"Apparently you are capable of being punctual, given the right motivation," Chien Na Wei drawls.

"I'm here," Oliver says pointedly, his voice gravelly and deep. "Let them go."

"You aren't in the position to be making demands right now, Arrow," she tells him, her tone bored and somewhat terrifying.

"And what are your demands?" He counters. "You got me here. Now what?"

"You've been a thorn in my side for five years," she tells him. "It's time to end that."

"If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it already," he points out, looking up at several of her men, perched on higher ground.

"Killing the man does nothing unless you kill the myth as well." she sneers.

Oliver hesitates at that, his heart sinking as he looks for ways out of this that leave them all breathing and his identity intact. Because that is what she's after. He's certain of it now. She will unmask him, unmake him, and kill them all.

"No," Felicity grits out, struggling a little against her captors, stumbling a little as her foot catches on a cord from the camera. "No."

Oliver's genuinely not sure if she's shouting that at him or her captors, but Chien Na Wei reacts, tilting the press of her blade until it cuts into the skin of Felicity's arm. It isn't deep. Oliver can tell that easily enough. It won't even need stitches. But Felicity isn't used to pain. Not like he is. Red threads of blood trickle down her arm and she cries out in surprise and pain, her eyes watering as her body jolts. Laurel shouts too, torn between cradling Sara on her lap, pressing Roy's hoodie to his wound and reacting to Felicity's cry. Oliver takes a step forward toward them without even thinking, but stops when several of the Triad cock their guns.
His mind is racing as quickly as his heart and Oliver raises his hands in a non-threatening gesture. Probably reacting to the shouts, the SCPD rush in. There's eight of them, weapons drawn and ready. Bryce and Lance leading the way. They spread out behind Oliver, their backs to each other. Chien Na Wei looks more amused than upset by this development, though, and Oliver can't help but think that bodes poorly for all of them.

"Put the weapons down and your hands up," Bryce orders boldly, his stance firm and his gun pointed at Chien Na Wei.

"You are a little man with little power, standing behind the vigilante you swear to hunt," she tells him dismissively. "I will not bow to you."

"What is it you want?" Lance asks, barely able to tear his eyes from his girls.

"The Arrow. Unmasked. For all the world to see," Chien Na Wei announces with sickening triumph. There's only one way Oliver can respond. And he knows it.

"Let them go," Oliver says, unable to keep the edge of desperation out of his voice. "Let them go and I'll take the mask off myself."

"I'm not so stupid as that," she reminds him. "You can take the one bleeding out all over the floor. But the girls? They stay. You're weak because of them. They make you fearful and desperate. They always have. Your… connections to others. To the world. They will end you. Which is fitting, because being disconnected from the world is what made you."

"This is your idea of poetic justice?" Oliver asks.


His eyes slide over to Roy, the boy his sister loves so much, the sidekick he hadn't realized he'd needed. He really does look terrible, pale lips and sallow skin with too fast, too shallow breath and an ever-growing pool of blood beneath him. Oliver's seen enough gut wounds to recognize when one is potentially life threatening. This one is. He knows it in his bones. And he can't let Roy die. Not when he can do something about it.

"Fine," Oliver agrees.

"You can't," Felicity insists.

"He'll die if I don't, Felicity" Oliver tells her. "Soon. I can't let that happen. I don't have a choice."

Felicity can't move much between the gun and the knife on her, but she tilts her head slightly to look at Roy and lets out a pained moan at the sight. It's a noise Oliver hopes never to hear from her lips again.

"Your men can take him," Chien Na Wei tells Bryce.

Bryce signals to the two closest officers who approach Roy with great caution. Laurel doesn't let up the pressure on his wound until one of the officers takes over. Somehow, the pair of men manage to carry him out.

Oliver tries not to watch.

He honestly doesn't know if Roy will make it. He's even less certain of his own fate.
"You'll let the others go, too?" Oliver asks. "After you get what you want?"

"If they don't force my hand," she shrugs, turning the knife back and forth against Felicity's arm as if she can't quite decide whether or not to press in.

"They won't," Oliver tells her, his eyes fixed on Felicity's as he speaks.

She's shaking her head hard, tears streaming down from her beautiful eyes. But all of the protests in the world can't change the reality of their situation. And the only way Oliver can see out is through.

"No more stalling," Chien Na Wei tells him. "Your mask. Now. Right where you are, in front of the camera for all the world to see."

He will give up anything he has for the people and the city he loves. That is true of all of him. Of Oliver Queen and the Arrow, has been for years. And it strikes him, quite suddenly and with horrible timing, that maybe those aspects of himself aren't all that different after all.

He can't look at anyone as he does it.

His eyes fix on the floor in front of him and he steels himself for what's to come.

The movement is slow, deliberate and the air thick with expectation and weighty with importance. His hand grips the edge of his hood, its heavy, familiar cloth rough against his fingers. Laurel lets out a sob from somewhere to the side and Felicity is whispering protests mostly to herself that he can barely hear.

But they can't change this.

And neither can he.

He pulls the hood back and tugs the mask from his eyes, tossing it uselessly on the floor in front of him. Slowly, he raises his eyes to the camera in front of him, his face haunted and gaze heavy, laden with guilt and regret.

Lance lets out a long string of curses and Bryce mutters something darkly that Oliver can't really hear, but he's not so much focused on them. He can't be. His eyes, instead, lock with Felicity's. There's fear there, of course, and sorrow. That's to be expected. But there's support, too. With the hood or without it, she still looks at him like she believes in him. Like she supports him. And that connection… Chien Na Wei is wrong. That connection doesn't make him weak. It makes him strong.

"And now the whole world can see it," Chien Na Wei announces triumphantly. "The Arrow is not some superhero. He's just Oliver Queen."

"You're wrong," he tells her. "I'm not just Oliver Queen. I'm not just the Arrow, either. I'm both. Always. And I am better for it."

In spite of everything, Felicity smiles at this, chokes out a sob and blinks up at the ceiling. This is what she wanted, he realizes. Not for the city or even for herself. For him. And God does he love her for that.

"Let them go," Oliver demands.

"Your friends are loyal. Aren't they?" Chien Na Wei responds, her tone chilling as she slides the knife against the line of Felicity's collarbone. "I wonder… what are the chances that they'll let this
"They will because I'll tell them to," Oliver insists darkly.

"I truly doubt you have that much influence," she replies dryly.

She's going to kill them. He can see it on her face, read it in her eyes and her voice. He tenses, ready to reach for his bow at the smallest of movements from her. But, ultimately, it isn't her that moves next.

There's a shout from above them and a body falls off the top of a truck onto the floor. If he stopped to think about it, Oliver would have assumed it was Digg. He would have been wrong, but he also doesn't stop to think. He reacts, instead. Years of finely honed instinct guiding his hand.

His bow finds its way to his grip instinctively and he sinks an arrow into the wrist of the man that has a gun to Felicity's head before anyone else has so much as moved. Chien Na Wei's attention is split between Oliver and the new threat and Felicity is smart enough to realize an opportunity when she sees one. She drops her weight to the ground, pulling down instead of away and managing to avoid the knife entirely.

"You have harmed my beloved," growls the newcomer, jumping down off the truck directly in front of Chien Na Wei. "And you will answer to me for it."

Nyssa is livid, jaw tight and nostrils flaring in anger. Oliver is very, very glad not to be on the receiving end of that look.

"I don't answer to you, demon spawn," Chien Na Wei hisses in response, falling into a defensive stance, her knife at the ready.

"Put the weapons down," orders Bryce, with what Oliver considers to be the worst possible timing ever.

But then, Bryce clearly realizes that this is a situation ready to spiral out of control at any moment. And he's not wrong about that.

"Kill them all," Chien Na Wei orders.

Then, all hell breaks loose.

One of the Triad shoots first, but the police return fire nearly immediately, two officers Oliver doesn't know falling immediately to obviously fatal shots. Lance positions himself in front of his girls, shouting at Laurel to get her sister out of there, to safety. Felicity scrambles to Oliver's side and he steps protectively in front of her even as he fires arrows, picking off the Triad above them, to the sides of them, seemingly everywhere all at once.

"Move back," Oliver orders. "We're too exposed. Use the truck as cover."

She does. He follows, walking steadily backward even as he fires. Nyssa and Chien Na Wei are a blur of motion and battle. He can't shoot at one without risking hitting the other and he's not willing to do that. So he keeps picking off the rest of the Triad instead. It's strange, doing this without his hood and mask. Freeing, in some ways, but also leaving him feeling naked in others.

"Are you okay?" He asks Felicity, sparing her a very quick glance between shots.

He wants to hold her, kiss her, whisper things in her ear and run his fingers along her skin. Feel her
pulse, alive and steady beneath her skin. But this isn't the time for that. Distraction, even of the best sort - especially of the best sort - is a very bad idea. He's fought enough battles to know that.

"Barely a scratch," she tells him. "But this still ranks as one of the worst kidnappings I've ever gone through. A solid two on a scale of one-to-ten, so far. Ask me again in twenty minutes, though. That might change still."

He grimaces at that. She's trying to be light-hearted about it, but he hates that this is a thing she can rank.

He's taken down about half of the Triad - all non-lethal shots, which is sort of amazing - when he hears a shriek behind him. He turns swiftly and finds two of the Triad have snuck up behind Felicity. His bow isn't nearly as useful at this close of a range, so he drops it and uses his body as a weapon instead.

The first is easy enough. He's overconfident about facing a disarmed Oliver and he pays for it. Quickly. Oliver uses the truck next to them for leverage, pushes off of it and slams into the man's left kneecap as hard as he can. There's a sickening crack and the man howls in pain as his knees bends the wrong way. His eyes roll up into his head as he collapses to the ground and he is most definitely no longer an immediate threat to Felicity, Oliver or anyone else.

The second man is a much bigger challenge. He's more calculating than the first. And armed with a knife he clearly knows how to use.

They duck and parry and trade blows, a morbid dance with very high stakes. The knife slashes at his side and misses Oliver by a whisper of air, slicing his leathers but not his skin. There are some hits he takes, calculated losses to gain the upper hand with the next strike. He's more evenly matched with this man than he'd like.

Apparently they're more evenly matched than the man would like as well, because suddenly he changes tactics. He pushes off of Oliver, sending him stumbling back, and grabs Felicity instead. There's a sharp, shrill shriek from her, a little noise of terror that shoots through Oliver's veins with a terror that he never feels for himself when he's in danger.

He's diving forward, willing and able to do anything at all to save her, when two shots ring out and blood starts flowing freely from the man's chest, gushing forth in steady pulses that are undeniably the sign of a kill shot.

The man crumbles to the ground, leaving a stunned Felicity standing before him, shaking and wide-eyed. Behind her stands John Diggle, gun still in hand and aimed at the dead or dying man on the ground.

There's danger everywhere still. Certainly. But Oliver can't not pull Felicity into the safety and comfort of his arms. Not when she's shaking like this. Not when he was so close to losing her. Again.

"I have never been so happy to see you in my life. And, believe me, that's saying a thing," Felicity tells Digg, gripping his forearm, still wrapped in the safety of Oliver's arms.

"Pretty mutual feeling right about now," Digg assures her. "We were a little worried about you."

"To be fair, I was worried about me, too. Very worrisome situation," Felicity nods, stepping back from Oliver to let him draw his bow again. "I'm still kinda worried."

"Come on," Oliver says, letting loose an arrow that strikes home in the shoulder of one of the last
Triad members before stepping back out into the open, Felicity and Digg in step behind him.

The only Triad member left standing is Chien Na Wei, but 'standing' is a generous term. Nyssa has thoroughly beaten her. There's blood on her lips, in her snow-white hair. Her arm hangs at an unnatural angle and Oliver can see a part of her collarbone has broken through her skin.

Nyssa, triumphant and unyielding with murder in her eyes, holds the woman's blade to her throat.

"Nyssa!" Oliver shouts sharply. "Don't do it."

"I am not you, Oliver Queen," she announces, sliding her blade into Chien Na Wei's neck and twisting. "It's call the League of Assassins for a reason. There is no mercy for those who dare go against me."

Chien Na Wei's eyes go wide for a moment, blood bubbling up out of her lips and gushing from the neck wound in horrible, steady pulses. She tries to say something, but they'll never know what because she can only make a sickening gurgling noise. And, in seconds, the light dims in her eyes.

"You didn't need to do that," Oliver tells Nyssa.

"We'll disagree on that, then," Nyssa says, turning toward the Lances.

Captain Lance took a bullet to the leg somewhere in the fighting. It's painful, certainly, but far from a kill shot. Laurel, apparently, had refused to leave her father's side. Or maybe she just couldn't get anywhere safer while dragging an unconscious Sara along. Either way, for the second time today she's keeping pressure on someone's wound.

"Is she alive?" Nyssa asks gravely, rushing to Sara's side.

"They drugged her," Laurel replies, to Nyssa's obvious relief. "First thing they did when they got into the room when they grabbed us. Some kind of tranquilizer dart."

Nyssa brushes some hair gently behind Sara's ear, her fingers caressing the other woman's face. It's a stark contrast to the look of the woman who, moments ago, shoved a knife through someone's throat. It switches back quickly, though, as she surveys the room and her eyes settle on Major Bryce, who is wide-eyed and pointing his gun in her direction.

Nyssa actually smirks at that, amusement obvious on her face, and she rises from Sara's side to take a few strides in the police officer's direction.

"No," Oliver tells her again, stepping right in front of her.

"I'm doing you a favor," Nyssa hisses at him. "He's seen your face. He knows your name. You will not know peace until he breathes no more."

"Everyone knows my face, now," Oliver says, eyes darting briefly toward the damned camera.

"You didn't see?" Nyssa asks, her head quirked to the side as she evaluates him. "Perhaps you were too distracted by your beloved's plight."

"What are you talking about?" Oliver demands.

"I cut the feed," Felicity pipes up from his side.

He startles at that and looks at her. She's fidgeting with something in her hands, but offering up a small smile that's laced with pride and affection. He's so damned hopeful that he's sure he heard her
"What? How did you… Really?" He finally settles on.

"When I tripped. Just before she cut my arm," Felicity confirms, holding out the item in her hands to him - his mask. "I pulled the cord with my feet. Your secret's safe, Oliver. See? We save each other. Kinda makes us an awesome team, doesn't it?"

He doesn't see the bodies around the warehouse, suddenly. He doesn't take note of Nyssa or Bryce or the Lances or Digg. All he sees is Felicity. All he wants to see is Felicity. And he knows, without a doubt, that he has never loved anyone like he loves her.

And he never will.

He doesn't take the mask from her hands. It's her's to hold onto for now, which seems fitting. He holds onto her, instead. His hands find her face and he leans down to kiss her, long and hard and far from chaste. She sighs against his mouth and he's pretty sure that's his new favorite thing.

"We're the best team," he tells her when he finally steps back a bit. "We're partners."

Her cheeks dimple as she smiles broadly, looking up at him with so much delight that it floors him.

"Put down your weapon or I will shoot," Bryce says, apparently finally finding his voice. "You're under arrest for murder."

Oliver looks, fully expecting to find Bryce looking at him. But he's not. He's looking at Nyssa. This is an infinitely more dangerous choice on the part of the police officer.

"You can try," Nyssa says darkly, twirling Chien Na Wei's knife in her hands.

"Nyssa," Oliver says with a warning tone, letting go of Felicity and standing back directly between Nyssa and Bryce, his back to the police officer.

"He ought be thanking me," Nyssa hisses. "I have culled the infestation of vermin in his city. He ought be grateful. To both of us."

"You don't kill cops in my city," Oliver informs her. "They swore to save this city, the same as I did."

"They are nothing, Oliver Queen," Nyssa says in astonishment. "They are little men, cannon fodder."

"Killing them brings no justice," Oliver points out.

"You would stand between me and him?" Nyssa questions. "You would go against me for this no one?"

"I would stand between any threat and the people of this city," Oliver tells her firmly.

"Have it your way then," she relents. "It makes little difference to me. It is not me he poses a danger to."

"Put the knife down," Bryce says again, having moved a few steps to the side, lining up a clear shot at Nyssa.

Her patience is lost at this. She moves with a grace and swiftness worthy of her League of Assassin
heritage and before Bryce can blink his gun has been wrenched from his hand and his arm is twisted at an odd angle, Nyssa's mouth next to his ear and her knife at his throat.

"You cannot take me. I am Heir to the Demon and a daughter of the League. I will not bow to your judgement," she hisses.

"Nyssa!" Oliver says sharply, on edge and ready to react.

"I will not end him," Nyssa says, her tone bored. "Not unless he forces my hand. He is your problem, Oliver Queen. I have greater concerns."

"Like what?" Felicity asks warily.

"Like Malcolm Merlyn," Nyssa replies. "His crimes are many and his blood is owed us for his sins."

Oliver tenses at this, his thoughts turning to Thea. Lately, it seems like one problem just spirals into another in their lives. Felicity and Sara and Laurel might be okay - and God he hopes Roy is too - but then there's this. Thea. Thea, who he has always been willing to do anything to protect. Thea, who is running with Malcolm Merlyn while the League hunts him. It chills him to the bone.

"I respect you and your code, Oliver Queen, even if it sometimes makes you weak. But know this," Nyssa tells him solemnly, "Malcolm Merlyn will pay for his crimes with his blood, whether it be running through his veins or someone else's."

There is no room to misinterpret what she's saying.

"If you hurt her-" Oliver starts.

"I genuinely hope that I do not have to," Nyssa informs him. "But I will do what I must to bring justice to Malcolm Merlyn."

"Hurting her would not be justice," Oliver points out.

"Perhaps not," Nyssa acknowledges. "And yet it would bring him great suffering. There is some satisfaction to be found in that."

"I don't tolerate threats to my family," Oliver growls.

"I have no want to threaten them," Nyssa informs him. "Get Malcolm Merlyn to turn himself over and I'll have no need to. Unless you now are considering him family?"

There's a horrible suggestion. He hates Malcolm Merlyn. For everything he's done, the people he's killed, the lives he's ruined. And yet… and yet he is Thea's father. Does that make him family? Does that earn him some measure of protection from the Arrow, for Thea's sake if not for his own? Oliver doesn't know. He hasn't really thought about it. To be honest, he really hasn't wanted to.

"I am certain we shall meet again, Oliver Queen," Nyssa says, interrupting his thoughts and pushing Bryce forward. "Until then…"

By the time Bryce turns around to look for Nyssa, she's disappeared the way she came. In shadows with silent footfalls. She's a ghost, an apparition that slips through their fingers like water. Or blood. More than that, though, she's gone from an ally to a problem. Oliver has a great and desperate hope that once Sara is awake she'll be able to reign Nyssa in. He's not holding his breath, though.

"We need to get Captain Lance and Sara some help," Digg says, speaking up for the first time in a
"I called in backup during the fight," Bryce tells them. "There are ambulances on their way and more police. Three minutes out, tops."

"I've got Lance," Digg says. "Felicity, think you and Laurel can manage carrying Sara? Oliver needs to get out of here."

"Yeah. We've got it," Felicity says with a firm nod, giving Oliver's hand a supportive squeeze before heading over to the Lances with Digg.

"So... am I going to just walk out of here?" Oliver asks Bryce.

"You'd just stand here and let me arrest you, wouldn't you?" Bryce asks in surprise. "You wouldn't put up a fight at all."

"You know who I am, now. There's no point in running and I'm not about to kill someone trying to protect the city for the sake of preserving my identity," Oliver replies. "I do this, I do all of this for the same reasons you do - to protect the city and the people I care about, not because I thrive on conflict."

"You're right," Bryce replies. "I do know who you are now. And I'd arrest the vigilante in a heartbeat if I saw him. But I don't see a vigilante. What I see's a good samaritan. I don't arrest them."

Oliver lets out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding and stares as Bryce reaches out a hand. He pauses only a moment before shaking it.

"I don't know if I was wrong about a man not being able to change or if I didn't really know you in the first place," Bryce tells him, his grip firm. "Maybe both. But I do know this - you aren't who I thought you were. And I'm glad for that."

"Thank you," Oliver says.

"Now get out of here before more officers show up," Bryce tells him. "I'll handle this and be in touch later."

He doesn't have to tell Oliver twice. Oliver pulls his hood back up, nods once at Bryce, firm and decisively, and glances once toward Felicity and Laurel helping a newly awakened but very groggy Sara out to the street. Then, he's gone, melting into the same shadows that Nyssa had used, sending a grappling hook to the roof and skimming the skyline, disappearing in the glare of the midday sun.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Please note the rating change. If you do not read fics with an M rating, you can just go to the second section of this chapter (after the line break) and lose none of the plot. There's just the epilogue after this chapter, which is both exciting and a little sad if you're me. Which I am, so... both excited and sad. Thank you yet again to all of the wonderful readers and reviewers who have helped keep me so very invested in this story. You can't know how much you've all helped. I'm so grateful for you guys. <3

In the aftermath of the fight, Oliver spends a solid half an hour trying to get in touch with Thea with no success. He'd be out of his mind with worry after Nyssa's not-so-veiled threat if it weren't for a voicemail on his phone.

She'll contact him, she says. When it's safe. Whenever that might be. She got out of Starling and she's fine but Malcolm thinks they're being tracked and she has to ditch her phone.

His life seems like a series of loved ones put in danger these days and its frustrating. But, even with that, today was a win. Roy's hurt. Badly. But he'll live. Chien Na Wei is gone. Permanently. Everyone he cares about lived through the day. The police are backing off. And his identity remains uncompromised.

Mostly.

"Though the feed cut out, we aren't left entirely without clues as to the Vigilante's identity," says a voice from the television as he enters his QC apartment.

"Very true, Debbie," says another voice from the television. "Notorious Triad leader Chien Na Wei, who police confirm was killed in today's confrontation, specified that the Arrow has been - and I quote - 'a thorn in her side for five years.' But, as we all know, the Arrow has only been active in Starling City for the last two years."

"Precisely, Mark. So that implies that Chien Na Wei knew the Arrow's identity," Debbie points out.

"It also narrows our list of candidates, wouldn't you say? I think, at this point, we can rule out Oliver Queen as the Arrow. Or, at least, as this Arrow. After all, we all know where he was five years ago and he certainly wasn't in the position to be a thorn in anyone's side."

"Never thought you'd be thankful for something Chien Na Wei said, did you?" Felicity asks from his kitchenette, tossing a grin over her shoulder at him as she speaks.

She's right. He didn't. But there's something… freeing about the truth once again being buried.

"I'm surprised you're back already," he tells her, making his way across the room toward her.
"Yeah, well, they wouldn’t let me see Roy in ICU and Captain Lance has Sara and Laurel with him. There wasn't much for me to do after I gave my statement to the police," Felicity shrugs.

"So you're… baking?" Oliver asks a little bewildered as he realizes what she's doing. "Is this some, like, post-kidnapping ritual of yours or something?"

"No," she snorts, wiping at her cheek with her hand and streaking flour across it, which is adorable. "I just needed to *do* something and, well, I figured Lyla and Digg have their hands full, right? People cook things when other people have babies. That's a thing they do, right?"

"I guess?" Oliver questions, because he honestly has no idea.

"It is. Like, freezer meals and casseroles," Felicity confirms.

"So you're making Digg and Lyla….?" Oliver asks, dangling the question out there as he closes in behind her and looks over her shoulder.

"It's a chicken pot pie," she says uncomfortably.

"Okay," he agrees, looking at the soupy mess of ingredients that in no way resemble a pie or edible food.

"I'm terrible at this," she sighs, tossing a spoon down on the counter. "I don't understand *how*. Cooking is just chemistry. I'm *good* at chemistry. I can science. Why can't I cook?"

"You have other skills," he tells her, dropping a kiss down on her collarbone and pressing his lips against the spot Chien Na Wei had held a knife to her just an hour or two ago. "We'll hire them a chef instead, okay? You can soup up their baby monitor or something, if you want to help them out."

He says all of this with his lips still brushing her skin and his hands curled around her hips.

She lets out a little sigh and leans back against him, cooking forgotten. She stretches one arm up and around to toy with the short hair at the nape of his neck and laces the fingers of her other hand with his along her left hip.

"I was scared today," he admits into her skin.

"Me too," she agrees.

"Seeing you on that tv in Pamela's office when I thought you were safe up here…" He says with a shudder, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she murmurs, tilting her head to the side to catch his eye. "We're good. We're *great*. We saved each other. Go team us!"

He grins at that and chuckles because how can he *not*? He doesn't understand how she does this to him, how she can twist a tense moment on a dime and make it lighter, make his life lighter. But she does. And *God* is he grateful for it, for her.

"You know what occurs to me?" He asks, dropping another kiss on her shoulder and moving his fingers to trace the lines of her hipbone.

"No, but I'm *really* hoping its the same thing occurring to me," she replies with with a bit of a moan, leaning back against him.

"We're entirely alone and no one is barging through the door," he replies, his voice a touch deeper
than usual and laced with intent.

"Oh thank God, it's totally the same thought," she sighs out, turning in his embrace and wrapping her arms around his neck as he swoops down to kiss her.

He sort of wants to make her do that sigh thing against his lips again, but when he tugs at her bottom lip with his teeth she does the exact opposite and sucks in a breath instead. And… yeah… that's at least as good.

Of course now his brain is wondering what other noises he can coax from her and that's… an inspiring question.

He walks them both backwards until her hip is pressed against the counter near her failed cooking adventure. One of her hands reaches back to steady herself, find solid ground, and she knocks over a bowl of peas and diced carrots in the process. But, frankly, he couldn't care less about that if he tried.

"I… mmm… sorry," Felicity mutters as he sucks against the skin on the underside of her jaw.

"It's literally two dollars worth of vegetables, Felicity," he says against her skin. "I'm a little preoccupied with other things at the moment."

"And I am such a fan of this preoccupation," she sighs out, angling her body so it presses fantastically against his.

She's wearing a dress, one she's worn a dozen times to the office. One he's quite honestly fantasized about sliding his hands under for the last year or so. It's tight and a little too short and goddamned perfect because he can reach the hem of it with ease right now.

He drags his fingertips up the back side of her legs, inching up the hem of her skirt even as he sucks against the sensitive spot just behind her ear.

"Nngh, Oliver," she moans as his fingers trace the line of her underwear around the curve of her ass before moving to the front to slide between her legs.

"Oh God," he groans, rubbing his fingers against the sopping wet fabric. "I've barely touched you yet. How is it even possible that you're this wet?"

"Well… you walked in the room. So, ah, there was that. That helped," Felicity whimpers, grinding down against his hand a little.

"Wait… seriously?" He asks bewildered, his fingers stilling against her.

"Pretty much, yeah. You know. Always."

"Oh God, I am never going to get work done ever again," he groans, his forehead resting against hers.

"I can see the headlines now: Vigilante activity down, sex with girlfriend to blame," she snorts before realizing exactly what she just said and flushing horribly with nerves or embarrassment. "Not that I'm giving myself a title or anything. That's not a thing I'm doing. Because that would just be-"

"Felicity," he interrupts, his hand moving from between her legs to stroke high on the outside of her thigh, under her skirt. "You can give yourself any title you want. There's not a single one that could possibly fully define what you are to me anyhow."
Her lips part in surprise and she blinks up at him, beautifully stunned. Clearly he's going to have to make it very clear to her exactly how much he loves her. Repeatedly. For as long as she lets him.

"Partner?" She suggests after a moment, a slow smile spreading across her face.

"Well… maybe one title covers it," he agrees with a grin, leaning in to kiss her again.

"Hmmm, maybe," she hums happily against his lips.

The kiss that follows is all hot breath and wet tongue and he's so damned turned on by Felicity kissing him slow and dirty that his palms itch to just hoist her up onto the counter and tug her panties off right then and there. He doesn't though. He would have, once upon a time. But he's more than his impulses these days and there's more to be had from this moment than just an orgasm or two. Still… that doesn't mean they can't move this along a little.

Amazing as it might look on her, the dress has got to go. He needs his hands to run along her skin, find the places that make her gasp or groan or laugh. He needs to see how far down her blushes really go and exactly how many freckles she's got. He needs to taste the salty tang of her skin and feel the texture of her nipples as they pebble in his mouth. He needs it. Needs her.

Still kissing her, he reaches around to the back of her dress to find the zipper. It's not there. He palms up the sides of her dress, feeling for it along the seams beneath her arms. Yeah. It's not there either.

"Felicity," he says, backing up a few inches, more than a little delighted to see her looking a bit dazed. "If you wore that dress to frustrate me, it's working."

"I've worn this dress for like a year to frustrate you," she blinks back.

"Okay, that… worked, for the record," he informs her. "But right now, the frustration is more because I can't find the zipper and I'd very much like to get this lovely dress off of you so I can explore every inch of your body. If that's okay with you."

"I… yes," she says, stumbling over the words a little. "That's a good plan. A-plus plan. Definitely a fan."

"Felicity," he grits out, dragging out the word because she still hasn't answered.

"Oh. Right," she says shaking her head a little. "The zippers. They're on the shoulders. Underside of the hem. Want me to-"

"No," he interrupts, stopping her hand as she reaches for the well-hidden zippers. "I mean… I'd really like to. If you don't mind."

"I'm pretty much the opposite of minding," she says with a little laugh, her hands dropping to her sides.

His tongue darts out to wet his lips as he settles a hand on her shoulder and he feels rather than hears Felicity's breath catch. Knowing where the zipper is now, he finds it easily. Her skin prickles easily at his touch, a shudder of goosebumps breaking out across her skin. He kisses her temple, long and soft and cherishing as he pulls the zipper back on one side, then the other.

"Oliver," she moans quietly as he peels the dress off of her, slides it down her body.

But his hands don't skim down her sides to reach for all that newly bared skin and his eyes don't trail down her body. Not yet. Not right away. Not while she's looking at him like that, with want and
depth. His hands cup her face and his lips cover hers.

The rightness of this, of them, washes over him. Because she is his and he is her's, no matter what name he's being called by.

"Of all the times for you not to be shirtless, Oliver…” Felicity says with a raised eyebrow as they part.

He laughs sharply at that and tugs his shirt off over his head.

"Better?" He asks.

"Absolutely. The world is right again," she nods, tangling her fingers with his and moving toward the bed.

"Yeah," he echoes, not even caring that he sounds more than a little dopey. "It really is."

She's charmed by this, apparently, in spite of him sounding like a lovesick fool. Or, maybe because of it. He's not really sure.

She sits on the bed as soon as they reach the mattress and runs her fingers down the length of his still-clothed thighs. His hips jerk involuntarily at the unexpected press of her fingertips so damned close to his cock. She looks entirely too self-satisfied by his reaction, grin wide and eyes bright.

"Felicity," he grits out as one of her hands drifts up to trace the line of skin just above his pants and the other curls inward toward the inner line of his thigh.

"Hm?" She questions, looking up at him with entirely too much innocence given the situation.

"Are you trying to make some kind of a statement here?" Oliver asks her as she thoroughly tests his restraint, slowing popping the button on his jeans and dragging the zipper down ridiculously slowly.

She bites her lip and grins, tugging his pants down before responding.

"I dunno. Looks like you're the one with the exclamation point, Oliver," she says cheekily, glancing at his crotch with raised eyebrows before looking back up at him.

He blinks at her because… seriously? Had she really just said that?

"I think," he says finally, crawling over her as she reclines on the bed, "that you'll find I can be very emphatic."

She laughs at that, loud and happy as she drapes her arms around his neck and lets him settle between her thighs.

Oliver's had a lot of sex over the years. More than he should have, if he's being honest. But it's never been like this. Not because he's never slept with a woman he loved - he has - but because it's never been joyful. It's never been fun. Not like it is with her.

"Glad to hear it," she grins, dragging her toes up the back of his left leg. "I'm a fan of proper punctuation."

He chuckles, shakes his head and kisses her. Because she's ridiculous. And he loves it.

He coaxes a happy little noise from her as his lips prise hers apart and his hands bury themselves in her hair, elbows planted on either side of her.
She strokes up and down the line of his spine as she kisses him in return, her back arching to press herself against him as much as she can. The feel of her skin against his, the soft drag of her uncalloused fingertips against his scarred back, it soothes him and excites him in equal measure, simultaneously further charging the moment between them and bringing him to a place that feels almost like peace.

Expanses of skin are available to him to explore that never have been before and as much as he could kiss her lips all day long - and he might be doing that in the near future; that seems like a great plan - right now there's more than that on the agenda. His lips trail down her chin to explore the long, slim column of her neck. He mentally catalogues the way her breath catches when he sucks just beneath her jawline and the flat out whimper he manages from her when his teeth scrape against the edge of her collarbone and the way she moans his name as he kisses a meandering path down the skin along the inside edge of her bra strap.

She shifts a little, slipping the bra straps off her shoulders, and he pushes the cups down, kissing a line over the slope of her breast until he reaches her nipple. He drags the flat of his tongue across it first, a long, wet stripe that draws an interesting half-formed noise from her. Then, though, he closes his lips around the stiffening peak and sucks against it, letting his tongue rub against it as he does.

Her response is immediate.

Her back stiffens and her legs tighten around him, heels digging into his ass as she sobs on his name.

Yeah. He really likes that reaction. A lot.

"Oliver," she chokes, toes digging into his hips.

It takes him a moment to realize that she's actually trying to drag his underwear down using her feet. Points for ingenuity, really. And he's not complaining.

"Can we just-" she starts, her hips moving against his body probably without even thinking about it.

"Yeah," he breathes out. "Let me just grab a-"

"We're good," she interrupts to his surprise, stilling his hand with hers as he reaches for the nightstand.

His eyes are probably comically huge as he looks back at her.

"I've seen your blood work like with absurd frequency. I know you're clean. I am too. And I'm on birth control, so..." she says, biting her lip with a little half shrug. "Unless you aren't okay with that?"

"No," he scrambles because oh my God it's been an incredibly long time since he's had sex without a condom and it's an amazingly appealing idea. "No, I'm... I'm definitely okay with it."

"Yeah?" She asks, looking some combination of excited and hopeful and that just does things to him that he can't quite define.

"Yeah. Yes. Definitely," he says, not even caring that he probably sounds like an overeager teenager.

"Okay then," she grins, biting into her lower lip. "Good."

'Good' is kind of an epic understatement in his book, but he'll take it. He can't actually talk at the
moment though because he's pretty sure if he does he'll continue to sound like he's about seventeen and desperate to get to third base. So, he acts instead.

Sure fingers slide behind her back and work at the clasp on her bra. She arches her back in response, leaving space for his hands and pressing her mostly-bare breasts against his chest. The fabric sides off soon after and he kisses her lips as he hooks his fingers around the sides of her underwear. She lifts her hips instantly, letting him tug the scrap of cotton down her legs.

The scent of her instantly fills his senses and it's like a drug that muddles his brain, overwhelms him and drives him to kiss her a little more urgently, a little more purposefully.

Somewhere in between the press of lips and the exploratory slide of hands against each other's skin, his underwear joins hers on the floor and then it's just this. Just them. Skin on skin and eyes locked on each other with no barriers left, no walls yet to crumble. Maybe that should be scary, but it's not. It's just... right.

Her leg shifts to pull him closer, the heel of her foot digging into his ass as she strokes a line up his spine with her delicate fingers, creating a thrill that shoots up his back in the wake of her hand. He touches his lips to hers, more a sharing of breath than a kiss, as he presses into her, the tight, wet heat of her body proving better than even the dreams that have plagued him for the last year and a half.

She sighs contentedly against his mouth as he fills her and he recognizes, immediately, that it's this that's been missing every time before. Contentment, he thinks, is sorely underestimated. He's never had a problem finding passion in his relationships or even one-night stands. Happiness, though, has proven an elusive notion.

Until this.

Until now.

He rocks into her, slow and purposeful, as he kisses along the line of her jaw, teasing at her skin with his tongue and teeth, finding where she sighs or gasps or her breath hitches. It's amazing, he realizes. He's more caught up in what she's feeling than what he is.

"Oliver," she murmurs on a moan and he pulls back from the curl of her jawline to see her face because he can't not look at her when she's saying his name like that, all breathy and low and half-formed.

There's connection there, in the space between them when her gaze locks with his. And in this moment, nothing matters but them. Nothing at all. The last few days, the complexities of their lives fade away into insignificance. What matters is this - the slide of her hips against his, the splay of her long blonde hair against his pillow, the happiness and want in her eyes.

He could lose himself in this. He knows it, has always known it. That's why he'd fought against it for so long. Nothing threatens his mission to save the city so much as his own happiness. Except... except there's also her. His mission is the same as hers. And he won't let her lose that sense of purpose for him any more than she will let him abandon it for her. They balance each other, even each other out, in every way that matters.

They're partners.

Her breathing speeds up in a telltale way and her hips start to meet his with more urgency. He's not there with her. Not yet. But that's okay because he really doesn't want to be distracted from seeing what this does to her, how she breaks apart beneath him as the bliss rolls through her body. He wants
to watch that happen every bit as much as he wants his own release and that's saying something.

He reaches for her thigh that's wrapped around his hip and pulls it up slightly, changing the angle of their joining ever so slightly, letting him press deeper into her. Her eyes widen and her lips part instantly, breath coming in shallow little puffs of air.

She's so damned close. He can see it and the need to drive her over the edge is all-consuming.

His pace speeds up and his hold on her thigh tightens just a bit, just enough. And then her back is arching, her head tilting back against the pillow as a flush starts on her breasts and rushes up her skin. Her walls flutter around him, coaxing him further toward the breaking point. It's so damned tight and warm and perfect that he sort of can't believe he isn't orgasming along with her, but he's also glad he's not. Instead, he's taking in every moment of her experience, the way her neck stretches out and the spotty rhythm of her breath and the way her eyes flutter shut seemingly against their will.

It's goddamned gorgeous.

He keeps thrusting into her, trying to drag out this moment as long as he can, until her breathing normalizes and her eyes blink open. Despite every instinct in every fiber of his being, he slows to a stop and kisses her temple with reverent softness.

"You good?" He murmurs against her skin.

"Mmm, I'm miles past good," she replies.

He can hear the grin in her response. It's infectious, spreading across his lips in turn as he pulls back to look at her again. She wiggles a little beneath him, her hips shifting against his, and he cannot possibly help the groan that follows or the instinctive way his hips drive back into hers.

"Why'd you stop?" She asks him, quirking an eyebrow in a way he interprets to be a challenge.

"Wanted to give you a minute," he sighs out as she slides against him again.

"Maybe I don't want to give you a minute," she replies, smiling broadly as she drags her toes up the back of his leg.

It sends a shudder through him - either her toes on the back of his knee or her teasing words, he isn't sure which - but either way it gets him moving again.

She's nowhere near coming a second time. He knows it and she must too, but that doesn't seem to bother her in the least. Her hands are all over him, trailing from his back to his face and down to his chest. Both of her legs are hitched around his hips, pulling him impossibly deeper into her body and fuck that's good. All of it. Her touch is everywhere and her gaze is heavy and happy in equal measure as she works to coax his body into following after hers.

He drops his head against her shoulder as he pistons into her, his breath coming raggedly and his nerves feeling raw and exposed. She nuzzles her nose against his cheek as her hand curls against the nape of his neck, scraping her nails through the closely shorn hair.

"I love you," she breathes with gravity against his skin, breath tracing a trail across his cheekbone toward his ear.

And that's it. That's all it takes.

He moans into the crook of her neck as his vision goes stark white and something explodes
underneath his skin, sending a rush of pure joy through his veins. It lingers, that feeling, in a way he's not used to, but wholly welcomes.

Even after the waves of bliss lapping at his senses fade away to nothingness, he doesn't pull out of her body. The newness and rightness of this connection, so complete and monumental, is something he can't get himself to sever even in the smallest way. Not right now.

Her fingers trace along the edge of his hair, nails scraping lightly against his scalp in a way that makes him lean into her touch and curve his head to kiss the inside of her wrist. Her breath catches at the press of his lips to her pulsepoint and that's just... *everything*.

"Hi," she says as he pulls back a few inches to look her in the eyes.

"Hey. Hi," he responds.

Daylight is still streaming through the window, spilling across them with a yellowed hue that makes her blonde hair shine against the gunmetal gray sheets. He lets a curl of it slide through his fingers as her hand trails up and down the back of his neck in soothing strokes that reignite something in his veins.

There are still problems out there, still a city to save, a sister to find and protect, friends to recover from serious injuries. Life will never be simple for them. Not entirely. But this... this is right. This is *easy*. And maybe that doesn't threaten their mission. Maybe it makes it easier.

"I love you, too," he tells her, saying it as much with his eyes as he is with his tongue.

Her smile is unsurprised and all-encompassing.

"You know, I got that memo, actually," she says through a toothy smile.

"I'm glad," he replies, kissing her lips and thrilling at the curve of her grin pressed against him, because of him.

"So... we're pretty good at that," she tells him, cheeks still flushed from exertion and joy.

"We are," he agrees, kissing her again, longer and more purpose-driven than before. "But... you know what they say."

"Mmm, what's that?" she asks, her breathing picking up a little as she shifts her hips slightly, pulling his body back towards a heightened state, his cock hardening again already inside her.

"Practice makes perfect."

She laughs in response as he kisses her.

It's his favorite sound ever.

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Somewhere during the night, Oliver turned off their alarms. It might be a Tuesday, but after two kidnappings, an arrest and a media storm over the last five days, they've earned a few days off from
work.

Besides, she's tired. She's got to be.

He wakes up before her, but doesn't get up. He just lies there instead, drinking in the sight of her in his bed.

Even in her sleep, she's smiling. Her hand is resting against his heart, which is sort of fitting, and her hair is a cloud of pale tangles against the pillow. She's got a hickey on her neck and beard burn on her thighs and her lips are still kiss-swollen from when they woke up an hour or two ago and lost themselves in each other again and she's honestly never looked more beautiful to him than she does right now.

He doesn't want to wake her. But apparently someone else has another idea.

Oliver's phone rings and despite him reaching for it immediately, Felicity still stirs next to him, stretching and yawning lazily.

"Go back to sleep," he tells her, brushing some hair back from her face as he answers his phone.

"Hm?" She asks sleepily, somewhere in that hazy place between asleep and awake.

"Yes?" Oliver asks into the phone.

Felicity blinks toward wakefulness, watching him as he swings his legs over the side of the bed and pulls on a fresh pair of boxers as he listens to whoever is on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, let them up," he sighs before hanging up.

"Company?" She asks.

"Bryce and Lance," Oliver tells her. "If you want to go back to sleep, I can talk to them down in the office."

"Nah, I'd like to see how Captain Lance is doing anyhow," she replies, stretching her neck to the side as she talks. "Besides, I'd kinda like to know if I'm still under arrest or not."

"Not," Oliver responds immediately, voice edging toward a growl. "I will make sure of it."

"Oliver," she says affectionately. "You can't pay or shoot your way out of me being under arrest."

"Watch me," he counters.

She rolls her eyes and lets it go.

"So, here's a thing... Bryce and Lance are on their way up and I'm naked," she tells him.

"I did notice that. Repeatedly, actually," he laughs.

"Oliver," she says with weight.

He opens a drawer and tosses her a sweatshirt and a pair of boxers, which she accepts gratefully. Yesterday's dress is... not wearable at this point. And putting it on to hurry back to her apartment and change would feel too much like a walk of shame. This isn't that and she doesn't want it to feel like it is.
They both dress quickly and Felicity pulls her hair back into an extremely messy bun that does nothing to mask the I-just-had-sex hair. As if the hickey on her neck wasn't a sign enough. Oliver would be lying if he said there wasn't a bit of male pride surging in his veins at the sight of her in his clothes and looking more than a little worn from the evening prior. It's a little startling how much he wants this all the time. Every morning, for as long as she lets him.

He knew this was it for him a while ago. At least he did when he was being honest with himself. But the level of want for this, for them, for her… that bit throws him a little.

The knock on the door jolts him, even though he was half waiting for it. He's still buttoning his shirt though, so it's Felicity who goes to answer it, looking dwarfed in his sweatshirt which is sliding off one shoulder and hangs well below mid-thigh.

"Hey. Come on in," she tells Lance and Bryce as soon as she opens the door.

Lance is leaning heavily on a cane, favoring his injured leg, and blinking at Felicity with some combination of embarrassment and surprise. Bryce just raises an eyebrow and glances past her toward Oliver.

"We… ah, I guess we shoulda called ahead," Lance says uncomfortably.

Felicity waves it off, though, and Oliver can't help but be entranced by the easy way she's slipped into his life so effortlessly, answering his door and making herself at home alongside him.

"It's fine," Felicity tells the officers. "I was just going to make some coffee. Want some?"

"Please," Bryce says as Lance nods.

Oliver catches Felicity's fingers as she turns to head toward the kitchenette. He pulls her back, kisses her temple, softly and lingering, tucking a blonde puff of loose hair behind her ear as he does.

He doesn't give a damn that Lance and Bryce are there. This is them. This is their morning. And if they're going to do this - and they are - then he's going to remind her of what she means to him through gestures big and small every time he feels the need to.

She smiles up at him and squeezes his hand as he steps back. Their fingers untangle and linger only momentarily as she turns and walks toward the coffee maker he'd ordered just the morning before.

He can't help but watch her as she crosses the room.

He doesn't look back toward Lance and Bryce until one of them clears their throat. When he does, Lance is looking at him like he doesn't recognize him. And maybe he doesn't. Captain Lance knew Ollie well, but he doesn't really know Oliver at all.

"The charges against her have been dropped," Bryce tells him straight away.

Oliver lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding and the tension in his shoulders loosens immediately.

"Thank you," Oliver says with immense gratitude.

"No need for thanks," Lance tells him. "Evidence wasn't there. There's no case against her. Not with this multiple Arrows thing."

"And me?" Oliver asks, intentionally quiet enough that Felicity can't hear it.
"We aren't here to arrest you," Bryce tells him. "The SCPD is devoting its manpower to tracking down Malcolm Merlyn for a laundry list of charges that might well get him the death penalty. We don't have the inclination or the funds to go after someone who uses non-lethal force to save people in immediate danger and make citizen's arrests. Even if he does wear a mask."

"Thank you, again," Oliver breathes.

"Thank you, Mr. Queen," Bryce tells him seriously. "You saved our lives yesterday. More than once. That… woman. Nyssa? She'd have killed us both if you hadn't intervened."

That might not be true. Nyssa would certainly have killed Bryce, but Oliver doesn't really think she'd have killed Lance. Nyssa might be an assassin but she also loves Sara. She wasn't about to kill Sara's father.

"Nyssa is… she's complicated," Oliver says with a wince, in what might be a massive understatement.

"She's also a murderer," Bryce tells him. "Even if she did fight on our side against the Triad, Chien Na Wei's death was murder, plain and simple. If she shows her face in this city again, we'll have to arrest her."

"I understand," Oliver tells them. "But believe me when I say that staying away from her is by far the best thing for Starling City. You want to keep it safe? Leave her alone. If you did manage to arrest her - and that's a big if - you can't begin to imagine the chaos that would follow."

"But you can?" Lance asks, looking confused. "I don't get it. Five years on a deserted island and you come back an expert archer with a sense of duty and an authority on the world's worst criminals. How the hell did that happen? Chien Na Wei said you'd been a thorn in her side five years now. How's that even possible?"

"I wasn't always on the island," Oliver admits after a long moment, the words feeling heavy and hesitant in his mouth. "And fighting for survival meant more than hunting for food and making my own shelter."

That's as much as he'll give them. Talking about those years is never easy and he's not about to bare his soul to Bryce and Lance, but he can't give them nothing. Not in the face of this. Not when they've backed off the SCPD and given him and Felicity both a new lease on freedom.

"But-" Lance starts in until Bryce interrupts him.

"We might, from time to time, call on you for information," Bryce says, shifting the conversation slightly. "Since you clearly have resources we don't."

The look on his face reminds Oliver that the other man had been a soldier before becoming a policeman. He knows well the wounds of war, knows how to spot it on others and when not to push. Oliver had never expected to be grateful to Orrin Bryce for anything, but in this moment he surely is. Lance has never learned when not to push.

"Just let me know when I can be of help," Oliver nods, stretching out an arm to shake Bryce's hand. "How we can be of help."

The smell of coffee fills the air and Oliver glances over toward Felicity again to find her standing on her tiptoes to reach the coffee mugs. A surge of affection washes through him again as he drinks in the sight of her.
"Media's still a pack of vultures," Lance offers up, his gaze undoubtedly following Oliver's to the petite blonde in the kitchen. "They ain't gonna leave her alone, you know."

"I know," Oliver murmurs. "She's strong, though. She can handle them. And their interest will shift. It always does."

"It'll shift from her kissing the Arrow to her kissing you. Not sure that helps anything," Lance tells him gravely.

"I'm not letting her go," Oliver says heavily, looking back toward Lance. "We'll keep things quiet from the media for now. Let it die down. The Arrow won't be seen with her again. But I will. In a few months, when people will figure she's moved on. I'm not worried about the media. Not really. Pamela can manage them. It's the Arrow's enemies that concern me."

"Well... the Triad is gutted," Bryce tells him. "But it's not like you have a shortage of people who'd like revenge against you."

"I'm aware," Oliver tells them as Felicity walks over and hands the officers some coffee.

A quick trip back to the kitchenette and she rejoins them, handing Oliver a coffee and settling next to his side with a mug of her own. Her arm brushes against his and her whole body curls towards his instinctively. He shifts his coffee to his left hand so he can drop his right to the small of her back, dragging his thumb across the line of her spine.

"We're dropping the charges," Bryce tells her, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Oh good!" Felicity says brightly. "Felony charges look so bad on a resume. Not that I'm applying anywhere. Obviously. I'm not going anywhere. Just, you know, felonies are bad, that's all I'm saying."

Oliver laughs, loud and sharp, because this is so very her.

"Dunno if he'd let you if you tried," Lance says with a knowing look between Oliver and Felicity.

"Sure I would," Oliver says immediately, because this is a notion that needs to be corrected. "I wouldn't be happy about it. I'd do everything I could to convince her to stay. But Felicity's her own person. I don't get to make her do anything. I wouldn't even want to."

Her face goddamned beams at him for that. But that's not why he said it. He said it because it's true.

"Well, luckily for both of us, that's not an issue. I have no intention of going anywhere," Felicity tells him, leaning into his taller frame.

"I hope you mean that literally," Oliver tells her.

He says it on a whim, but it's true. It's true and he means it and he can tell she doesn't quite get what he means yet, but Lance surely does if the way he's blinking in Oliver's direction is any indication.

"Well... I mean, eventually I'm going to have to leave the room," Felicity says slowly.

"As long as you're coming back to it," he replies.

"What?" She asks, adorably confused, her nose scrunching up.

"Stay, Felicity?" he asks her. "Here. With me."
"Are you… asking me to move in with you?" She asks slowly.

"Yeah," he replies, feeling a little unsettled as he waits for her response.

"Oliver," she murmurs, blinking at him with an unreadable look. "Is this because you think my apartment isn't safe enough?"

"No," he says immediately. "I mean… it's not, but no. It's because I love you and I want to wake up beside you every morning and fall asleep next to you every night. I want to hear you sing terrible, trendy songs I don't even recognize in the shower and have my closet overrun with your shoes. I want that. So, please… stay?"

Felicity's eyes are wide and she looks like she has possibly stopped breathing for the moment.

"Jesus, Queen," Lance mutters under his breath.

That's fair, probably. The last time Oliver agreed to move in with someone it was Laurel. That had taken them three years and he'd been so uncommitted to the idea that he'd slept with her sister and taken her with him on the Queen's Gambit.

But Oliver isn't giving Lance all that much thought. Not right now. Not when it feels like Felicity is holding the key to his happiness right in her hands and she's deciding if she wants to try and use it.

"You can… you know, think about it. If you want to," Oliver tells her. "I didn't mean to spring this on you."

She kisses him instead of responding in words, rising up on her toes and pressing her lips hard against his. His coffee sloshes over the edge of his mug as his hand dangles at his side. But he doesn't care.

"Yes," she breathes against his lips.

His pulse surges at that and a grin breaks out, full-fledged and well-deserved. This is the kind of happiness he never thought he'd have. Not after the island. He hadn't thought he'd deserved it. Not really. And he hadn't known how much he'd wanted it. Not until her. And now… now it just fits. With his life. With his mission. Things just shift and the picture is clearer, better.

"We should go," Bryce says. "Let you two… be."

Oliver is, most definitely, a fan of this idea.

"Glad you're doing better, Mr. Lance," Oliver says, looking toward the captain, Felicity still tucked under his arm, curled against his chest.

"I've had worse. You have, too," Lance says with a shrug. "It looked worse than it was."

"Good," Oliver replies.

There's a moment where things just hang in the air, but there's clearly more that Lance wants to say, even as Bryce is opening the door to leave. And he does, after a moment of careful thought.

"I dunno what happened to you in those five years. Can't imagine it was anything good. But what it did to you? What it turned you into? Gotta say, it looks good on you, Queen," Lance tells him. "That boy who left on the boat damn near killed both my girls. He was selfish and thoughtless and I hated him. I'm sorry for what he went through in those years. And I'm sorry for the way I treated you.
afterwards. I thought you were the same, treated you that way. I was wrong."

Oliver nods at that, firm and strong, and offers an outstretched hand to shake Lance's. He can't speak, though. The knot in his throat keeps words at bay. He's known Captain Lance a very long time, but he's never, ever had the man's approval. Not until now.

It means more than he'd have thought it would.

Bryce and Lance exit the room without another word, leaving Oliver and Felicity in an easy, comfortable silence.

She drains the rest of her coffee, puts the empty mug down on a nearby table and drapes her arms around his neck, little fingers tracing his hairline. He loves this. He loves it. And he can't believe he gets to keep it. But he does. She's staying. And, for once, so is he.

"So how are we going to do this, then? Manage the whole media thing and the safety thing?" She asks after a moment.

"The same way we do everything," he tells her with certainty, trailing his fingers down the side of her face. "Together"

"Together," she hums happily, leaning her cheek into his palm. "I like the sound of that."

He does, too.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This has been, without a doubt, the best experience I've ever had writing a story. I want to give a tremendous thank you to all of the incredibly supportive, wonderful readers and reviewers out there that have helped me so much and definitely influenced both how quickly this story was written and the directions it took. I'm immensely grateful.

I have always intended this story to serve as something that *could* have happened in canon. It's never been meant to be the end of the series. As such, one problem is solved, but more loom. I don't tie everything up neatly and that's intentional. I am leaving the door open on writing a sequel at some point (I think it's pretty obvious what it would be about) and I will absolutely be doing one-shots in this 'verse.

On that note... I've made this a series, so that related stories can be easily found. I'm also happily taking suggestions on what you'd like to see from one-shots in this universe. Feel free to leave a comment here or on my Tumblr (same user name). And thank you, again, for the warm welcome to this fandom and your support. You're all wonderful!


Three Months Later

Professionally, this is the best goddamned week of Pamela's life. And, considering she'd been the head of QC's public relations team a few years ago when a guy in the accounting department had saved a toddler from a burning car wreck, that was saying something.

"Come on, Pamela. You've gotta give us something," Debbie is saying, microphone outstretched and eyes eager. "There's a reason you called a press conference and it wasn't to talk about the quarterly reports."

"Have you seen the quarterly reports?" Pamela asks, because she's a little bit of a vindictive bitch and Debbie wasn't even returning her calls two weeks ago. Plus, this is fun. "They're very newsworthy."

"Pamela…" a reporter from the Starling City Sentinel admonishes, rolling his eyes.

"Josh, you're an entertainment reporter," Pamela points out. "Are you expanding your column to cover business, now?"

"Only when the business in question is run by Starling City's very own royalty," Josh shrugs.

"Can't you find a new pun?" Pamela winces. "That got old decades ago. I mean, seriously, you guys. 'Queen's Queen?' You couldn't come up with a better headline?"

"That depends. You got a better title for her to give to us?" Eloise asks archly, pen poised to take notes.
The press are goddamned hungry for a story, for this story, and Pamela is savoring having them at her mercy maybe a little more than is professional. That's okay, though. After the shit they've put her through the last few months? She deserves this moment.

Ever since the first picture hit the papers five days ago, Pamela's been on cloud-fucking-nine. Seriously. She couldn't have planned this better if she'd tried.

Anyone who knows Oliver and Felicity has known that they're together for months now. But the couple has managed to keep things quiet from the press. Somehow. Until now.

They'd gone out for a bite to eat. Not to Table Salt or anything like that. Not somewhere Pamela might have expected from a billionaire. No, they'd gone out to Big Belly Burger. They'd sat side-by-side in a booth with his arm around her while she talked animatedly about something, gesturing broadly with a fry as she spoke. And Oliver, the lovesick sap that Pamela knows he is, had just stared at Felicity with a dopey grin, hanging on her every word.

And someone had gotten the shot.

Pamela could fucking kiss them both for it.

It's media gold. The Moby Dick of press coverage. Her CEO is wearing jeans and hanging out at a burger joint, for chrissake. He's a goddamned man-of-the-people. Relatable.

After the story had first hit, she'd shown up in Oliver's office with a pair of tickets to the Starling City Rockets - not the company box seats - and told him to take Felicity, buy hot dogs, wear a jersey and pretend like he wasn't not trying to get on the jumbotron. He'd been understandably a little weirded out about Pamela planning his date night, but he'd also recognized a good idea when he saw one and frankly it'd been awhile since he'd taken the time to go to a game. So he'd taken the tickets. With thanks. Pamela had smiled back like Christmas had come early.

Now, with Oliver and Felicity both definitely having made the jumbotron - because Pamela is not an idiot and some things aren't left to chance - the press is desperate for the story straight from her lips. Which is how she likes it. Make the media come to her, not the other way around. Pamela knows how this game is played. And she's very, very good at it.

"Do you not remember her name?" Pamela asks, tapping at her lips as if deep in thought. "I feel like maybe if you dug through some archives you could figure it out pretty quickly."

"Stop playing coy, Pamela," Debbie tells her. "It's never been your strong suit."

"How long has Oliver Queen been involved with his secretary?" Eloise demands.

And… yeah, Pamela bristles at that. This is an angle she needs to kill. Swiftly.

"You're misinformed about Felicity Smoak's title. She's not a secretary. If you think she's hanging around his office to take messages and grab him coffee, you clearly don't know her," Pamela corrects, even though that's not the soundbyte and she knows it.

"So inform us correctly then, Pamela," Josh says with annoyance.

"Felicity Smoak is, officially, Oliver Queen's executive assistant. Unofficially? She's his partner both professionally and personally," Pamela gives them. "We're talking about a woman who graduated with her master's degree from M.I.T. at the age of nineteen. She's shockingly brilliant, genuinely nice, incredibly funny and effortlessly beautiful. Queen Consolidated is lucky to have her. So is Oliver Queen."
Pamela knows how this works. They'll cut the middle bit of that statement, whittle it down to the part about her being his partner and both QC and Oliver being lucky to have her. That's okay, though. She doesn't need to give a laundry list of ways in which Felicity is exceptional. She doesn't need to worry about winning over the public for Felicity. The younger woman is more than capable of doing that for herself. Probably without even trying.

"So did he promote his girlfriend to be his assistant or did he start dating a woman who works directly under him?" Eloise asks bitingly.

Pamela pulls a face at that. Because of course that's where the press goes with this. Jesus. This is why she picked PR instead of being a reporter after majoring in journalism. These people…

"The scandal you're looking for isn't there, Ellie," Pamela tells her. "He promoted a friend he trusted to work at his side and offer her counsel. He started dating that same friend because… let's face it, they're both ridiculously good looking, young, single people who get along well and spend a tremendous amount of time together. Honestly, wouldn't it be strange if they hadn't started dating?"

"When did it start?" Josh asks.

"Just before she got kidnapped," Pamela answers.

"You mean when she got arrested because of her involvement with the vigilante?" Debbie asks with raised eyebrows.

"Let's not put words in my mouth," Pamela snarks. "I have enough there already."

"That timing, though, Pamela," Debbie says unflinchingly. "First she gets busted kissing the Arrow, then she gets arrested, then Oliver Queen bails her out of jail and starts quietly dating her? That doesn't sound like a coincidence."

"It's not," Pamela says bluntly. "Look, there's nothing weird about an unattached woman kissing someone who's helped save her life, if she's so inclined. There's also nothing weird about a man finally deciding to act on long-repressed feelings for a friend when he realizes he might lose her to a legitimate superhero. That's not a scandal, Debbie. That's a Ryan Gosling movie."

"You trying to sell the movie rights, Pamela?" Josh asks with a smirk.

"Not mine to sell," she replies, even though she knows he's joking.

"Would you go see it if someone did?" Josh asks, because he's an entertainment reporter and he can't possibly help himself.

"Wouldn't need to," Pamela tells him. "I see them on a near daily basis as it is. I get to save myself the cost of a ticket."

"Pamela, there's been speculation on and off about Oliver Queen being one of the Arrows for years," Debbie pipes up. "Given Ms. Smoak's sudden shift of affections from the Arrow to Oliver Queen, should the public be asking again if he's one of them?"

Pamela knew this question would come up. There'd been no way it wouldn't. And she'd prepared for it. Obviously she had, she's a professional. But she still tenses slightly at Debbie's words.

"I don't do PR for the Arrows," Pamela tells her. "If Oliver Queen is one of them, he's surely never told me. But, honestly, he's a very busy man. I can't imagine when he'd find the time to suit up and play superhero."
That's… true. In the strictest sense. He hasn't ever told her. And she hasn't asked. Because telling half-truths to reporters is different that flat-out lying to them and this question has always been inevitable. But Pamela's a smart woman. And she'll never, ever forget the look on Oliver's face when Felicity had shown up on television with a gun to her head. And she knows, even if she doesn't know.

"Should we be expecting wedding bells anytime soon?" Josh asks, shifting the conversation back toward the tabloid side of things.

And… God bless him, this is exactly why she invited Josh. Pamela will bury the hard-hitting questions in vapid conversation about Felicity's favorite designers and how they spent their first date and she will be glad for it because misdirection is a tool she knows well how to wield.

"Only if you know someone getting married," she teases Josh.

"Pamela," he replies, pulling a grimace. "Come on."

"How about we let them date for a while first before we start planning a wedding?" Pamela suggests. "Look. Oliver Queen has been through a lot in his life. There's absolutely no denying that. Between losing both his parents suddenly and violently, being shipwrecked on a deserted island for five years and his best friend dying in a man-made earthquake, I think he deserves a little happiness. And right now, he's got it. There's no doubt in my mind that's due, at least in part, to his relationship with Felicity Smoak. So, let's just let them enjoy where they're at for a bit and hold off on talk about wedding venues and baby bumps, okay?"

"What does Thea Queen have to say about all of this?" Eloise asks.

It's a question that sort of surprises Pamela, which annoys the hell out of her. She doesn't like surprises. Ever. But especially not from reporters mid-press conference.

"I haven't asked her," Pamela responds plainly, because it's true.

"No one has seen her in months," Debbie points out. "Where has she been?"

"She's a twenty-year-old billionaire. Where would you be if you were young, single and rich? She was travelling around Europe, last I heard," Pamela tells them. "But, honestly, I work for Queen Consolidated, not the Queen family. I don't keep tabs on Thea Queen."

"Do you think she'd approve of her brother's relationship with Felicity Smoak?" Josh asks curiously.

"I don't know her well enough to answer that," Pamela replies. "But I do think she'd approve of seeing him happy."

"Oliver Queen doesn't exactly have the best track record with women," Eloise points out, looking at Pamela with a heavy gaze.

"Due respect, but I'm pretty sure most of the comparisons you're making are nearly a decade old," Pamela points out. "People change. I'd say their odds are a lot better than you're assuming."

"If you were a betting woman?" Josh pokes. "What would you think of their chances?"

"I am a betting woman. And I wouldn't ever bet against either Oliver Queen or Felicity Smoak. Both of them together? Seems like a sure thing to me."
"The SCPD declines to make any comment about yesterday's events at this time," Bryce tells the horde of reporters that greet him as soon as he steps out of his car and heads towards the double doors to the hospital.

The din is horrible, a flurry of questions and demands that he is completely unwilling to address. It's the cap on a really horrible week that he can't wait to forget.

They'd been tipped off by the Arrow about a truly horrifying sex trafficking ring that had damn near overrun the west side of the Glades and the wharf. It had been too much for the Arrow to handle on his own and too much for the SCPD to handle on their own. In truth, it had almost proven too much for them to handle together.

Someone had tipped off the traffickers.

Bryce knows the Arrow well enough by now, knows his team well enough, to be certain the leak wasn't from them. It's from the SCPD. Someone in his department is kidnapping and selling runaways, street kids who society has already failed, and Bryce is going to tear through the department, pull it apart piece by piece until he figures out who it is. Because this? This ends. Now. Because he's said so. Because the only thing that disgusts him more than the idea of someone kidnapping and selling kids as sex slaves is the idea that it's a cop that's doing it.

But that isn't his only concern at the moment.

Far from it.

Team Arrow might not have had the leak in it, but it sure felt the ramifications of it. Bryce will never forget seeing the Arrow fall, two armor-piercing shots to his center mass sending the archer crumbling onto the floor of a dirty warehouse two blocks from the wharf.

Honestly, Bryce had thought Oliver Queen was dead the moment he saw the hits land. He'd been wrong at the time, but it's still extremely touch-and-go even now. Bryce and Lance had provided a police escort to the hospital, getting them there in damned near record time. Later, he'd found out that Oliver had flatlined twice on the way.

Felicity had beaten them there, pacing the waiting room of the ER when they ran in. He still can't get the look on her face out of his head. The pale-eyed look of terror, the way her hands shook and her body crumbled against John Diggle's for support as they wheeled Oliver past her, the paramedics still doing CPR.

She's an Army wife, he realizes, even if she and Oliver aren't married and he isn't really in the military. She sits - every night - wondering if he'll make it back home but supporting him all the same. She is strong, in a way that all military wives are. But right now? Right now she needs everyone else to be strong for her. And so does Oliver.

He's busy fighting for his life. He can't fight to protect his identity, his team. Not now.

But Bryce and Lance can.

The press had gotten wind of the Arrow being shot mere seconds after he'd been wheeled through the ER, hood and mask still firmly in place thanks to quick thinking by Lance. Someone with a
sprained wrist in the waiting area had posted something on Facebook, which had gotten shared over and over again until Channel 52 had picked it up and then the media really went nuts.

Lance had gotten Felicity and Diggle, and later the rest of the team, into a private waiting area. It wouldn't do to have Oliver Queen's very public, longtime girlfriend sobbing hysterically over the Arrow in public. Not if they wanted to maintain his anonymity.

And Bryce? Bryce handled the rest of it.

Far as he was concerned, Oliver Queen was shot in the line of duty. He wasn't going to let the press hang him for it.

The SCPD closed ranks. Bryce posting carefully chosen officers along Oliver's hallway, blocking off the media and guarding from anyone else who might want to take advantage of the currently unconscious hero.

They protect their own.

"How is he?" Bryce asks as he closes in on Lance, who's posted just outside Oliver's door and has been for at least the last ten hours.

"Breathing on his own," Lance tells him. "Which is a hell of a lot better than I'd expected."

Bryce lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"And the team?" Bryce asks.

"Felicity hasn't left his side since they brought him back from surgery. Pretty sure she hasn't slept either. She's a helluva strong woman but this..." Lance says, shaking his head. "Let's just say I'm glad she's got Digg and my girls. She needs 'em right now."

Bryce nods. Everyone has their breaking point.

"You talk to Pamela?" Lance asks.

"Yeah," Bryce winces. "Make sure we keep Felicity out of sight because if anyone asks, she and Oliver are on vacation for the next two weeks."

"You think that'll be enough time?" Lance asks skeptically.

"Honestly, I'm surprised we aren't all wearing black armbands about now," Bryce tells him gravely.

"Yeah," Lance agrees. "Me too. Dunno how many lives he's got but it seems like he's well past nine at this point."

"Long as it's at least one more," Bryce replies.

"He's got reasons to hold on," Lance says, possibly trying to convince himself. "He'll make it."

He does. But as far as the press is concerned, Oliver and Felicity have a very long vacation.
Two and a Half Years Later

It is no small matter of pride to Nelson that after three short years he's clawed his way up to assistant manager of large electronics. He has a position of authority and responsibility and he takes this very, very seriously. Under his leadership, the department's sales have risen 1.2% and they've sold 2.7% more credit cards, which is even more important than televisions, and Nelson is pretty sure if he keeps this up he might even make assistant manager of a whole store in a few more years.

That's a big deal.

His mom even says so.

So… yeah, he's important. And right now? Right now his staff is in need of his guidance. Because his people are standing around watching the televisions instead of selling them. And, okay, maybe it's not peak hours right now, but there are still people in the store and his staff is not being paid to watch tv.

"Emmy, have you talked to the girls over near the Sonys?" Nelson asks, arms crossed as he chastises the teenage new hire.

She won't make it here. He knows it. She's not cut out for this.

"Yeah, they're not buying a television. They just came in to pick up an iTunes gift card and they got distracted," she replies, never tearing her eyes from the screen in front of her.

Nelson huffs in annoyance.

"If they got distracted by the television, then there's a chance to sell them the television," he informs her.

"Uh… they got distracted by the Queen wedding," Emmy says, finally glancing at him as if he's the idiot here. "Seriously, have you not even looked at the television? Every girl in this store is in our department right now watching this because oh my God can that man wear a tux. And a smile. And oh man how romantic are they?"

She sighs as she turns back to the television, her hand clutched in a little fist over her heart as she blinks ridiculously at the screen.

Nelson looks around his department, his domain, and… yeah… they're all like this. Really? This is… this is a place of business, damn it! They shouldn't be here to ogle some rich guy in a tux who happens to be on the screen. The televisions are on to show resolution and the difference between HD and standard and 3-D and wow there are a lot of women in front of the 3-D display.

"This is ridiculous," Nelson proclaims, throwing his hands up in frustration.

This day is going to kill his sales numbers. Isn't there a sports game on or something? Does every station have to be showing Oliver Queen getting married? He doesn't get what the big deal is. People get married every day. Rich people, poor people, all kinds of people. What the hell makes this special?

He studies the television for a moment, trying to figure it out. The bride, he realizes, is someone he remembers clearly. His own little brush with celebrity, all those years ago when she'd tried to use her then-boss'/now-husband's credit card. Which was against policy, even if Kelsey had allowed it.
They look happy and wrapped up in each other and don't seem to give a damn about the camera filming them and Nelson does not care because this does not sell televisions.

"Still wouldn't let her use his card," he grumbles to himself, heading over toward a very bored looking man standing near the Panasonics waiting on his highly distracted wife. "Married or not, it's not her name on the card. It's still against policy."

Four Years Later

"Obviously, A.R.C.C. is thrilled with the passage of Measure 52," Kelsey Pelinski says clearly into the microphones thrust in front of her. "The Good Samaritan Protection Act helps to ensure that all our rights are protected. There's nothing illegal about wearing a mask and there's nothing illegal about saving someone's life. We need to recognize that and spend our time and resources going after the real criminals in this city. Ever since Major Bryce retired last year, the SCPD seems to have lost sight of that."

She's flanked by supporters, two on each side, all of them wearing dark green hoodies with their now familiar logo emblazoned across the front - two clasped hands, one gloved and one bare - Arrows' Rescued Citizens' Counsel printed beneath it. Four years ago, all Kelsey had wanted to do was say 'thank you.' It had taken a while, but eventually, she'd figured out how.

"Your opposition claimed that the passage of this act would result in an upswing in masked robberies and kidnappings," points out one of the reporters, her voice louder than the rest.

"Luckily for us all, the public realized that was ridiculous," Kelsey points out. "So did the criminologists we talked to. Look, if someone is going to hold up a convenience store, do you really think they're going to be concerned with whether or not wearing a mask is illegal? Clothing is a form of expression. That's something we protect in this country, last time I checked."

"Records show you've amassed a huge amount in campaign contributions," one of the reporters says.

"We're fortunate to have many supporters," Kelsey responds.

"Yet it's not all small donations from people in the Glades, is it?" the reporter follows up.

"A lot were, but not all," Kelsey allows. "Believe it or not, there are people outside of high-crime areas who are concerned with the idea of protecting the good samaritans of this city and it's not always the poor who need rescuing."

"Indeed," the reporter continues. "In fact, Mrs. Queen is one of your organization's members, isn't she?"

"She was rescued by a masked good samaritan," Kelsey nods, brow knitted. "More than once, actually. In fact, I'm pretty sure those are stories you covered, Gene. What's your point?"

"There was a sizable anonymous donation made to the campaign," he clarifies. "One might start to wonder if the Queens were the source of it."
"One might start to wonder if you know what 'anonymous' means," Kelsey bites back. "The Queens were generous enough to host a benefit gala for us. We raised a lot of money that night. Some of it was anonymous. It's going to stay that way."

"And what's going to happen to all that money now that the campaign is over?" Asks another reporter. "Unlike many political campaigns, you've barely scraped the surface of the funds you've amassed."

"The Arrows' Rescued Citizens' Counsel's work is far from done," Kelsey assures them. "We have a legal defense fund set up for good samaritans being wrongly persecuted by the police. We're working to maintain support groups for victims of violence throughout the city. And we're in the process of setting up free self-defense classes and first aid training. This measure doesn't mark the end of our work. It's just the first step in the right direction."

"Ms. Pelinski," says the first reporter again, drawing her attention back. "Is there anything you'd like to say to the Arrows. If they're watching."

Kelsey smiles a little at this. It brightens her eyes, makes her look younger than all this serious business about politics and measures make her seem.

"I said 'thank you' once already," Kelsey tells the camera, staring right into it as she talks. "$ That time, I was a scared, traumatized girl who felt helpless and directionless. But the Arrow saved me, saved us. For years now. And all 1,752 members of A.R.C.C. are so grateful to have the chance to return the favor, in some small way. You've had our backs. Now we'll have yours. So, this time, when I say thank you, it's not just because you saved me; it's because you gave me purpose. I can't repay that, but I'll keep trying. I refuse to fail this city, and so do 1,751 of my closest friends."

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Six Years Later

Timing, they say, is everything.

Two weeks ago, Marcus Harrier had been on rotation in orthopedics. Now, however, he's in obstetrics and gynecology. This is not his favorite field of medicine. At all. But, at this point in med school, it's not like he has a whole lot of say.

Still.

He hadn't really thought he'd end up in the delivery room with someone he knows.

"Please tell me you took women's studies?"

It's seriously the first thing out of Felicity Smoak's - sorry, Felicity Queen's - mouth when she sees him standing awkwardly near the doorway looking at her chart. Because of course it is. They haven't seen each other in six years, she's four centimeters dilated - which he knows because he stared at her chart sort of an absurdly long time - and her first concern is whether or not he took women's studies.

"Both Intro to Women's Studies and Communication and Gender. Aced them both," he tells her with a smile, three very confused med students on the same rotation as him looking at him in confusion.
from his side.

"Well done, Dr. Harri- oh fuck," she curses, smile falling quickly as her face contorts in pain, another contraction wrenching through her body.

"You're okay. Just breathe through it. You're good," her husband is saying next to her, looking fully like he's trying not to panic and almost succeeding while he's brushing her hair back from her face.

"Our definitions of 'good' vary hugely," she grits out through very short puffs of breath.

"I know. I know," her husband says with a wince. "Just… try to think of something else. Something relaxing."

"What, like my 'happy place?' My happy place is totally what got me to this point, Oliver. I really don't think thinking about that is gonna help right now," she says with a laugh that looks more like a sob and is probably actually a little of both. "Drugs would help. Can I have drugs? Drugs sound like… really good about now."

"Soon," says Dr. Ramirez, the attending, adjusting the fetal heart rate monitor on Felicity's… really incredibly huge stomach.

"How soon?" Felicity asks, sounding a little desperate. "Like… are we talking 'dinner is soon, it's just come out of the oven' or is it more like 'the game will be over soon, honey, there's only ten minutes left.' Cause… let me tell you, that last one is not gonna cut it right now."

"Probably somewhere in the middle," says Dr. Ramirez. "You're doing well, Felicity. This will all be over soon and you'll get to hold your girls, okay?"

Huh… twins. Well, that explains her size, anyhow. Apparently Marcus hadn't so much studied that chart as he had hidden behind it.

She whimpers again, another contraction causing her to curl into herself. Her husband holds her hands through it, pressing his forehead to hers, his shoulders hunched toward her.

Once upon a time, Oliver Queen had seemed virtually untouchable to Marcus. He'd been a myth more than a man. But in this moment, he's entirely, totally human. He's nervous and excited and obviously wishing he could do anything at all to take his wife's pain away.

He's real.

And that throws Marcus more than the idea that he's about to help deliver Felicity Smoak Queen's twins.

Three hours and forty seven minutes later, there are twenty fingers and twenty toes and two very good sets of lungs wailing in that hysterical tone that only a newborn can manage. Felicity is utterly exhausted. That much is immediately obvious, but she's still reaching her arms out for her daughters before the nurses have even finished cleaning them off.

The older baby - the bigger of the two, if only by two ounces - is cleaned off first, her airways cleared and little face wiped down. She's a squirmy one, but she settles instantly as soon as the nurse deposits her into Felicity's arms.

The new mom looks completely astonished as the newborn nuzzles against her skin, recognizing her instinctively.
"Oh wow… Oliver, I… just… wow," Felicity starts, apparently unable to finish a coherent thought.

She looks up toward her husband after a second, pulling her eyes away from the baby girl in her arms. He's staring back completely mesmerized, like he can't quite process what's actually going on, like he's hopeful and terrified all at once.

Marcus feels like this is a completely understandable reaction.

The other man reaches out a hand, ghosts it softly across his baby girl's full head of dark, curly hair. He lets out a little puff of a laugh, looking from the baby's face to his wife's and back again like he's in awe, like he can't quite believe any of this is real.

"You want to hold your younger daughter, daddy?" The nurse asks, holding the freshly swaddled smaller twin in her arms.

Oliver looks to Felicity for a moment. Like he's waiting for permission. Like this can't really be his. But it is. And all his wife does is smile hugely at him in return.


The nurse smiles gently and shifts the baby into his arms. She's a small thing with wispy light hair and clear blue-grey eyes that blink up him with hazy awareness. She doesn't fuss like her sister. She just takes everything in with wide, trusting eyes.

Marcus can practically see it as she wraps Oliver Queen around her little finger.

He settles into the chair next to his wife's bed, his little girl carefully cushioned in the safety of his arms. His eyes never leave the baby's face. Not for an instant. He smiles down at her, soft and nervous, and his eyes get dewey.

"Those are two beautiful, healthy girls you have right there. You did a great job, mom," says Dr. Ramirez, squeezing Felicity's shoulder.

"We did great work," Felicity corrects with a smile, looking to her husband. "We make an awesome team."

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**Nine Years Later**

Edith Smoak hosts poker games every Tuesday night. She's been trying to convince everyone to make it strip poker for years, but the other ladies won't do it and the men try to pretend they aren't interested.

Prudes, she thinks. The lot of them.

That's okay, though, because even at eighty-eight, Edith Smoak is one sharp lady and she and gambling are old flames. She knows how to fleece her fellow retirees.

Still… Joe Johnson brings the good bourbon and Regina bring a casserole and Gary is just
so handsome, so she always gets a good crowd on Tuesdays.

"Did you hear about Ethel in 42C?" Asks Arline Buckwiler in a gossipy tone that Edith is fairly certain is the other woman's only voice.

"Did she run off with Brad Pitt?" Edith deadpans.

"What? No!" Arline replies, looking highly confused. "Brad Pitt? What in the world… No, she moved in with her granddaughter. Isn't that just lovely?"

Edith scrunches her nose at this, because… no. No, it's not. As much as she loves her daughter and her granddaughter and her great-granddaughters, living with any of them would make strip poker Tuesdays a total impossibility and that's not an idea she's willing to give up on entirely.

"Woulda been better if she'd run off with Brad Pitt," Edith confides, stirring the god awful bean dip that Arline always insists on bringing but no one eats.

"You've got a granddaughter, don't you, Edith?" Arline asks.

And… that crafty old bat. She glances over at Joe Johnson as she talks and Edith's got this woman's game figured out. She's had it figured out since she was seventeen and working on the strip.

"One very brilliant, very beautiful and very rich granddaughter, yes," says Edith, blinking sweetly at Arline. "I've forgotten, Arline. Do you have any grandkids?"

"Oh… you know, one grandson. But he's quite busy," Arline says hurriedly, waving it off.

"Still," Arline says, not letting it go. "I can't understand why you don't live with her and her family in that big fancy mansion of theirs."

She's a little louder this time and it draws the attention of the people gathering around the poker table. Edith decides on the spot that Arline is most definitely not invited to strip poker nights.

"You goin' somewhere Eddie?" Joe asks, looking pleasantly unhappy about the notion.

"No, no. Not at all," Edith says dismissively. "Arline was just noting how lovely my granddaughter and her family are and how nice their home is."

She nods towards a picture on her mantle as she speaks. It's one of her favorites. Little Johanna has her arms wrapped around Felicity's leg and Tera is laughing as their dog tries to lick her face. They're adorable. Her three-year-old grandbabies always are. But it's Felicity and Oliver who really make the shot.

Edith Smoak's had a lot of men in her life. No shortage of love over the years, either. But she's not sure she's ever had anyone look at her the way Oliver Queen looks at her granddaughter.

One of his hands is cupping the back of her head and the other is braced against the small of her back. Her hands rest against the sides of his face, her fingers skirting the edge of cheekbones. They're each other's whole world and it's obvious. And it damned well makes Edith Smoak smile every time she sees the picture. Even if it does look suspiciously like another shot she recalls from nine years ago or so.

"Wasn't there a thing a while back where your granddaughter was involved with the vigilante?"
Arlene asks, all wide-eyed as if she doesn't really know and that it's somehow scandalous.

"That was the rumor," Edith confirms.

"I wonder… you know… what happened there," Arline nods conspiratorially.

"Well… you know what they say," Edith Smoak says with a coy smile that lifts away the decades from her weathered face for a just a moment as she glances back toward the shot of her granddaughter's family. "A picture's worth a thousand words."

Maybe, she thinks, this one is worth even more.

End Notes

So, you know when you come up with a story idea and you say to yourself “Wow that sounds like a long story that will take forever to write and I have no idea how it ends?” Yeah. This is that. I couldn’t help myself. I have some solid ideas where it’s headed but I’m more than open to ideas and suggestions, too. K? Okay. Secondly, it’s going to be long and updates may take a while. Thirdly? Thanks for reading!

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