Partners

by wordswehavesaid

Summary

In which Barry Allen is the Starling City Police Department's forensics assistant. Yes, Starling.

Notes

This is a bit of an experiment for me. A lot of inspiration goes to adeadlynighshade as well as a lot of other excellent writers on the site, although her AU "Don't You Run Away" made me want to throw my own into the mix. Enjoy!
Chapter 1

Much as Joe and Iris like to tell it otherwise, bemoaning the end result, it’s not an easy decision. Two choices placed in front of him, two offers. Two ways he could start the rest of his life.

He’s lucky to have even gotten the one job offer, and he highly suspects Joe’s hand in all of this. Barry’s spent plenty of time in the Central City Police Department precinct where his surrogate father works, growing up over the years with Iris. While shaking the image of him being ‘just a kid’ could prove problematic, it’d be easier. He’s already known there, accepted into that family.

And speaking of family, it’d bring him right back to the Wests, to the closest thing he’s known of home in over ten years now. He’s missed them through his college years, loves them.

Loves Iris.

And that’s why. Why he’s even opened this second email, why he’s agreed to a time and place for an interview, why he’s seriously considering moving—permanently—six-hundred miles away. Because as much as it hurts to be away from her, it hurts maybe, possibly, just a little bit more to be near.

If he’d gone like Iris to school in Central City, he has no doubt in his mind he’d be signing the proper paperwork at the CCPD right now, not a second thought. Because he wouldn’t know how freeing leaving Central is for him.

Ever since that night in his family’s home all those years ago when the happy world as he knew it was ripped to pieces—stabbed clean through—and he learned it was actually a terribly cruel, cruel place they were all living in, he’s been stuck. Stuck in that living room with that ball of lightning and the man inside, and everything he’s ever done, every choice he’s made, has been with that in mind.

But just because he’s devoted himself to the mysteries of life, of uncovering them with cold, hard logic and fact and science, doesn’t mean he has to be in any particular place to do so, does it?

As easy as it would be to fall into old habits, routines—a room in the West home likely still furnished, following after Iris always watching and waiting, the pitying if not disapproving looks at the station as he carries on his research—part of him will always be the sad, scared little boy who nobody believes, running and trying to escape.

He’s not sure anymore which way he’s trying to guilt himself. In the end, Barry chooses to go. And the rest of his life is about to change drastically.

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He’s been a lab assistant for the Starling City Police Department for barely a year, relegated to a cramped back office, when Adam Hunt gets taken for 40 million dollars by a nut job in a hood. Or so people say.

Barry’s not exactly privy to the excitement at first. The taskforce assembled to catch the guy doesn’t include him, and he thinks that’s probably because it’s being headed by Detective Lance. On his first day at the SCPD the grizzled plainclothes officer had looked at him with something akin to disbelief.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two. Guess the new hires seem younger every year, huh Detective?” He’d forced
something of a nervous chuckle.

Lance had simply shaken his head, muttered under his breath, “Just a kid,” and headed out of the station. They haven’t said much else to each other since, and the older man tends to use CSU Tech Kelton as a relay for any of his forensic needs.

So there’s really no need for him to get involved, much less use his special privilege as a member of the force to do so.

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Here’s what Barry knows about the Vigilante, Lance’s “Hood”:

1. He’s a man capable of exerting 1200 50-foot pounds of torque to break someone’s neck. He doesn’t need the bow and arrows to kill whatsoever.
2. His arrows are self-made, or at least self-assembled. No single company can be traced in their manufacturing.
3. He’s got to be loaded, if he can hide those kind of expenses. Especially on arrows that double as voice recorders.
4. He’s not just a killer. Distributing money back to his targets’ victims, getting confessions for misdeeds from the untouchable Starling City elite, and sparing the police whenever they come remotely close to capturing him all factor into this conclusion, which is admittedly hard to make as Barry sits three floors above the morgue.
5. Laurel Lance is either his informant or someone he is trying in the weirdest way to impress. When three out of the five cases he’s currently connected to line up with men the lawyer is trying to prosecute, it’s hard to ignore that kind of pattern. Barry’s pretty sure the only reason everyone else has is because Detective Lance would have an aneurism if they suggested it.
6. He has a poor sense of urban camouflage. Possibly the only color worse for a nighttime operation like this would be red. Barry likes to think there’s some deeper meaning to this, something that would counter the man’s so far sharp intellect because—
7. He’s scarily good at not leaving identifying evidence. Even the first recorded incident, sans arrows where he’d stopped an abduction, the only recoverable DNA off the abductor’s bodies had been their victims Tommy Merlyn and the newly returned Oliver Queen.

In the end, it’s so hilariously, sadly, frustratingly simple that Barry might just cry about it. But he doesn’t know it yet.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So this chapter functions as a way to bring things up to speed with the proper action, so not a ton of dialogue and a bit of summary. Just wanted to let you know. Hoping to get to the more exciting stuff next time. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry can’t help hovering, like a good majority of his coworkers, as Oliver Queen is dragged into the station in handcuffs and booked. He stands like a seasoned professional for his mugshot, but then again it’s not as if it’s his first arrest.

Considering the charges this time around, though, he’s almost eerily calm. At least, Barry knows he’d probably a frightened stammering mess if he was accused of murder and vigilantism.

The general buzz is confused. Some of the officers are saying Detective Lance has good evidence, others that the man’s wildly accusing the billionaire as part of a long-standing personal grudge. Barry does his best to tune out all the noise and simply watch, all the while comparing what he knows of Oliver Queen to the list in his head.

Rich, connections to Laurel Lance, at or near the scene of at least a couple incidents—but it’s common knowledge that the heir of the Queen fortune is supposedly an idiot, a typical trust fund baby both before and after his disappearance.

But could a spoiled one-percenter like the ones the Vigilante targets really have survived on an island for five years all alone, like his court statement says? Barry feels like he’s missing something, something that would make all this clear to him one way or the other.

It’s clear from the way the thin material of the man’s shirt stretches over his torso, though, that he has the build capable of being the Vigilante.

Someone bumps his shoulder, jolting him from his reverie. He’s surprised when he turns to see it’s McKenna Hall, a detective he’s worked with on a handful of occasions, and that she seems to have done it on purpose judging by the knowing grin she’s sending him. Barry raises an eyebrow in question, to which she simply nods forward at their high-profile arrest who’s being directed by an officer to turn for his final picture. When Barry’s eyes land back on the detective, she gives him a wink that’s almost conspiratorial.

It’s about then that Barry realizes while he was lost in his thoughts to anyone else he probably looked to be staring at Oliver Queen’s chest for a solid five minutes. Which is totally not true, because as a matter of fact he only just started to focus on Oliver Queen’s chest in the last minute or so and oh God McKenna Hall is trying to connect with him over some mutual appreciation of Oliver Queen’s chest and muscles and why does this have to happen to him?

Barry turns a red that probably matches Oliver Queen’s stupid tight shirt and promptly flees. This is what he gets for living in a city where no one’s heard of the girl he’s hopelessly in love with and he keeps refusing offers to be set up with the female friends of his coworkers.
All he wanted was to investigate.

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In the interest of doing so, Barry approaches Kelton about the allegedly concrete evidence that makes Oliver Queen the Vigilante. It doesn’t take much wheedling to get access; the CSU Tech is pretty proud of his find.

It turns out to be security footage of a stairwell the night the police actually kind of worked with the Hood they’re trying to catch to stop an assassin. Barry wishes everybody could make up their minds about whether or not the Vigilante should be stopped, though since he can’t it’s possibly unfair to expect of everyone else.

Sure enough, Oliver Queen does make an appearance, retrieving a rather suspicious bundle from a trashcan. It’s curious, but not exactly damning, and Barry listens to Kelton ramble on about how Detective Lance has put all the rest of it together while he keeps an eye on the screen.

“Wait, who’s that?”

“Who?” Kelton leans in, pauses the feed with a click on the face of a broad-shouldered black man in a suit holding a sidearm. “Hm, I think…yeah.” He’s pulled up a browser, brought up another case, this one the attack on Laurel Lance at her apartment by the Triad. “John Diggle. He’s been employed by the Queens as a bodyguard since that attempted abduction.”

“Did Detective Lance question him? It looks like he’s following the, uh, the suspect so he might’ve seen something, right?”

“I’m not sure,” Kelton frowns for a moment, then shakes his head. “And getting a comment from him wouldn’t be very easy. Guys in that business aren’t too keen on alienating clients or potentials by ratting them out to the cops.”

“I guess,” Barry agrees reluctantly.

But anything else he might’ve had to add gets swept aside when one of the other techs comes in, clearly excited by something. “Queen’s lawyered up—and you should see Detective Lance’s face!”

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Barry’s not aware of when his investigation into the Vigilante fully transitions into determining the chances of Oliver Queen actually being the Vigilante. He’s not even sure whether he’s trying to prove or disprove it.

The DA introduces the possibility of an insanity plea, which Barry dismisses in his head. No matter how many people call the Hood a nut job, the simple fact is that he is clearly a sane, logical thinker. It’s just unfortunate that logic dictates killing is the best way to eliminate a threat or opponent. The case for post-traumatic stress disorder is at least a little more compelling, and he has to wonder, vigilante or not, if Oliver Queen has actually talked to anyone about what happened those five years. Not that Barry’s much of an advocate for therapy.

He’s also not much of a believer in polygraph tests. Only four years ago, he’d volunteered to take one, if only for Joe, but the older man had told him that wouldn’t convince him of Henry Allen’s innocence. If Barry truly believed what he was saying, even if it wasn’t what happened, the polygraph would register it as true.
He doesn’t think whoever’s the Vigilante doesn’t realize what they’re doing, but Joe had been sure to cement in his head the multitude of reasons a polygraph was unreliable. It wasn’t impossible to fool one at all.

And Detective Lance does not seem to be taking any chances after Oliver Queen’s test comes back with results indicating he’s not the Vigilante. He’s had a GPS tracker placed on the billionaire in the form of an ankle bracelet. Barry supposes house arrest isn’t so bad when the house in question is a giant mansion, and waits like all the rest to see if Starling’s man in a green hood shows his, well, his hood.

When the officers downstairs start grabbing their gear, responding to a call that the Hood has come down on some kind of arms deal, Barry feels something inside him relax, like he and the rest of the city are a bowstring that’s been pulled too taut by this possible brush with the Vigilante’s true identity, and now things can go right back to how they were. He’s not sure if it’s relief or disappointment that leaves him slumped in his chair like this, all the anticipation and nerves and excitement sucked out of him.

“It just couldn’t have been Oliver,” he hears Detective Hall’s voice float up from below as she straps on a bullet-proof vest. “I knew him for years before he got stuck on that island. Now Lance has his proof and can focus on getting the real guy.”

McKenna’s kept her calm confidence this whole time, and he supposes that explains her willingness earlier to joke about his not-staring. He wishes he could have shared such a leveled outlook, because now his mind is left buzzing with half-formed ideas and theories and maybes that aren’t any good to anyone.

This gets interrupted by Detective Lance himself, who stomps into his back lab with a couple of evidence bags. “Need you to analyze these for an attempted hit case,” the man states brusquely, mouth pulling into a frown that looks painful as he adds, “Queen.”

Barry can’t help but give a start. “Oh, wow. Is he ok, sir?”

“Yeah, fine, I shot the guy myself. Now I need some ID, where he got his weapon, possible connections.”

“His connections might have been following the news the past couple days,” Barry can’t help noting as he reaches for a pair of gloves.

“Think I can recognize my mistakes on my own, Allen, and if not there’s plenty of other people breathing down my neck as it is;” is Lance’s reply, half-snarf and half-wounded pride, with maybe just a little bit of guilt thrown in for good measure.

“Sorry, sir,” he offers.

Lance’s face allows for something of a grimace. “Yeah, well just get me what I need on this. I can handle the rest.” He leaves Barry to his work.

Barry’s able to run the various analyses while he continues to think about what Lance just told him, something not seeming quite right. It’s not until he’s putting the evidence in storage and locking up the hit man’s gun that an image flashes once more into his mind; John Diggle, following his charge up a stairwell, armed and at the ready.

So if Detective Lance saved Oliver Queen in his own home…where was the bodyguard?
It’s not until the Vigilante takes on a lower-class family of bank robbers that Barry comes to the unfortunate conclusion that, while everyone else has dismissed the very notion, he is becoming convinced that they were correct before and really, actually, it just might be Oliver Queen. The thought terrifies him because either everyone’s been right about him for years that he’s just chasing crazy theories or Oliver Queen is some kind of mastermind.

While the change in the Hood’s M.O. is bewildering everyone else, with his working theory it makes perfect sense. The Vigilante seems intent on making those he feels responsible for the city’s ails face up to their crimes. Perhaps through his connections to the Starling upper crust, Oliver Queen feels it’s his own responsibility to make them do so. The Reston family, father laid off from Queen Consolidated years prior leading to a life of crime, could by extension fall under his responsibility.

Then there’s the shooting outside Queen Consolidated, where Oliver Queen chooses to run after the assailant instead of to his mother, all to try and get a license plate number. In those split seconds, the decision made there must have been his first instinct—to find the attacker and bring them down.

And finally, the Vigilante just has to go and prove he’s willing to work with others—lending just the support he needs for his bodyguard-as-Vigilante-double theory—by recruiting who people are now calling the Huntress. Confirmed by her father to be Helena Bertinelli, a woman reportedly caught on surveillance footage dining with Oliver Queen only too recently, even Lance raises his head briefly. But the matter isn’t pursued any farther than that.

And through it all, Barry doesn’t say anything, doesn’t raise any of the valid points he has or the many connections that are starting to pile up in his mind. He doesn’t know why. Maybe because it’s not his place as, after all, he’s not on the Vigilante taskforce. And who would be likely to take him seriously?

But really, he thinks, it’s because the thought of everyone discovering the Vigilante’s identity pulls that bowstring taut again, leaves him pacing the tiny space in his lab available and running his hands repeatedly through his hair to the point where it looks like he’s only just rolled out of bed. He thinks of Adam Hunt’s victims having their savings returned to them, of Stan Washington’s hospital bills being covered, of Emily Nocenti getting closure for her father’s murder, of Peter Declan being declared innocent for the murder of his wife.

Somewhere along the way, he’s decided he doesn’t want the Vigilante to be caught.

And that’s fine, really, because this theory of his—it’s just an idea. He has no evidence, no reason or imperative to come forward with his thoughts. Barry can just go on quietly wondering while Oliver Queen and the Vigilante go on not-so-quietly acting. Billionaire by day, saving the city by night. Maybe. And nobody ever has to know.

Then Christmas happens, and it throws this delicate balance all to Hell.

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It’s all hands on deck at the warehouse where the Copycat, now known to the public thanks to his television broadcast, had been holed up with hostages until the Hood went zip-lining in. The hostages all made it to the roof to be rescued, but the police haven’t been able to catch anyone else going out.

Most of the officers are preoccupied taking statements from the hostages and cordonning off the area to start a perimeter search. When let into the building, his CSI colleagues all gather in the room the hostages had been placed in, hoping to find some clue left over as to the Copycat archer’s
identity or motives aside from seeking a duel with the original.

But if it’s a duel that was the goal this space is too small, he realizes, backing out into the hall. Sure enough, there’s arrows littering the ground, green and black when he shines a flashlight on them. He’s eventually able to follow their path into another, larger room.

The officers who had come through on the first sweep were only looking for remaining persons, not blood stains or other evidence. Still, Barry draws up short at the sight of such a sheer amount spilled on the floor.

But who’s? The Vigilante, the Copycat, or both?

There’s a trail that leads to a broken window, somebody’s escape route, and when he looks down to see the ends of about three black arrows broken off on the ground, he knows this trail belongs to the Vigilante.

It’s with that thought that Barry feels as though he’s been put on a clock. It won’t take long for somebody else to wander back into this room and find the blood. Samples will be collected, analyzed, and identified. And he can feel his heart pumping madly, pounding in his ears as he realizes he can’t let that happen.

It’s all a frantic blur in his memory, using the supplies in his kit to gather everything up, wipe it away, save it from prying eyes, and he staggers down a fire escape at some point with it all, the damning evidence, and collects what’s fallen outside too. Makes to throw it in the dumpster he’s just finished cleaning the lid of blood, but he’s been to too many crime scenes for that kind of mistake. The alleys all sort of blur into one as he runs, and finds another one some unrelated number of blocks away, and buries his burden somewhere in the middle, where it won’t see the light of day.

He only really comes back to himself when he’s standing back in the doorway of the room with the hostages, a single swab in a little tube burning a hole in his pocket, and one of his coworkers looks up with a wry grin. “Late again, Allen? You’re lucky it’s Christmas, or I’d tell Pike.”

His quiet presence from before has gone unnoticed, it seems, and Barry is so, so thankful that for once he hadn’t chosen to run his mouth. In the moment he manages a weak laugh at the jibe, settles in with the others.

The official conclusion is that the fight between the two archers came to a stalemate. In his lab, Barry contemplates the single sample he was able to take from the Vigilante’s solitary trail to the window, the tube shaking in his hands.

He just has to be curious doesn’t he, has to know for sure. And then what? Never mind that he’s just irrevocably tampered with a crime scene, if he runs this and doesn’t hand over his findings, he’s aiding and abetting. Though really, he’s probably past the point of reminding himself of all the many charges that could be drawn up against him for this.

He doesn’t want the Vigilante caught, that’s all. Because he knows firsthand, the cops aren’t always right or able to bring the right people to justice. And he believes the Vigilante has and can continue to do so. Would he believe that any more or less if he knows truly who the man behind the hood is?

It’s very late, or perhaps early, when he runs the sample. It comes back with a positive match: Oliver Jonas Queen. The browser is prompting him to either save or delete the data. Barry screws his eyes shut a moment, then reaches out and clicks delete.
As he leaves the station to catch a couple hours sleep before his next shift he tries not to looked too panicked, rushed, or guilty even though he is in fact all of those things. For the first time in his life, he’s involved himself in something other than his ongoing mission to clear his father’s name, and he’s not sure whether that will prove to be something he regrets.

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John Diggle stands just inside the hospital room, watching Oliver’s back as always. The man stands stiff, firm, and stubborn before the window looking out at the falling snow, but there’s a heavy set to his shoulders. Defeat.

He doesn’t like to add to such a burden, but unfortunately there’s something his charge and friend needs to know, and he’s never been a man to put off a task because it’s difficult or unpleasant.

“Listen, Oliver, we’ve got a problem.” There’s a slight turn of the head indicating he’s being heard so he soldiers on. “After I got you here I went back to the warehouse. Lot of blood, needed cleaning up. But somebody’d already done it.”

At this, Oliver actually does maneuver his battered body around to face him, face something of a cross between bewildered and anxious. He wasn’t planning to be beaten, after all, wasn’t planning to leave behind evidence, so there was no contingency in place. John thinks this might be the first time he’s seen Oliver truly rattled, if not afraid. “The police?”

“Think if that were the case we’d have been entertaining a Detective Lance by now,” he points out calmly as he can. “Could be you’ve got somebody else in your corner.” If the other man would listen to the word on the street once in a while, he’d know there were more than a fair share who were already calling the Hood a hero.

Oliver only frowns, though, and counters, “Or there’s somebody in the Dark Archer’s. Whoever wrote the list my father gave me is bound to have others in their employ.”

John nods once. It’s something to definitely consider. “Guess we better keep an eye out for them.”

“Right,” Oliver agrees, a troubled frown crossing his brow, and John has a feeling he wants to be left to his thoughts about this unexpected turn of events.

So he heads out the door, holding it open a moment to say, “I’d recommend getting some rest, Mr. Queen. It is the holidays.”

Oliver forces a smile that’s tight if not a little amused. “Of course, Mr. Diggle. A Merry Christmas to you.”

Yes, they’ll need a respite for now, John thinks as he heads out to his car, if Oliver’s planning to continue his Hood activities while finding the originator of the list and flushing out their mysterious new friend or foe.

Chapter End Notes

Little bit of Oliver and Dig at the end there, just teasing that they’ve become aware there’s somebody out there who might know more than they're letting on, and is taking
actions. Oliver is of course suspicious. Next chapter we'll see where that leads. Thanks again for reading, and let me know what you thought!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Ok, pretty big stuff happening this chapter, guys. Wanted to get it out as soon as possible, so here you are!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He tries to be good, tells himself that it was just the one time, like a freebie or that space in the center of a bingo card you just got automatically. Not that he and the Vigilante are playing bingo, but just—he can’t even imagine the world of trouble that would await him if anyone finds out what he did. So he really honestly tries.

And it seems like the hooded man needs no assistance, particularly as Oliver Queen recuperates from what the tabloids call a motorcycle accident. He cringes thinking of blood and snapped arrows. When the Vigilante makes a return it feels almost triumphant as he saves one of the city’s fire chiefs. No murders, no M.O., just a selfless act to save a good man.

But then Barry just has to be moving from his lab down to the bullpen with completed files and overhear a conversation between Detective Lance and CSU Tech Kelton, about a phone gifted to him by the Vigilante that’s ended up in the hands of his daughter with a bug planted in it.

Barry almost drops the files in shock, and silently agrees with Kelton. It’s cold, so cold, what Lance is planning. He understands a lot about obsession, about a need to find someone responsible and see them pay for what they did. He even understands, too, how Lance might feel he’s doing this in his daughter’s best interest, having been the surrogate son of a cop for the better part of twelve years.

But his stomach practically revolts at the idea of Joe ever doing something like this to him or Iris in the interests of their safety, and knows that Laurel Lance would feel the same if she knew. Or when she knows, since there’s no doubt that the lawyer will have to find out soon after the next time she makes a phone call. Never knowing she’ll be setting a trap for her former flame, her friend, Oliver Queen. The city’s hero.

And Barry knows that he’s already chosen, and that he can’t just sit by and let things happen or it will all have been for nothing anyway and what sort of a coward would that make him?

So he squares his shoulders, takes an early lunch break, and catches a bus out to CNRI. It’s fortunately not incredibly busy inside the office; at least, the person he’s come to see is sitting alone at her desk, typing away at something on her screen.

Barry stands there a moment, draws in a breath, and adjusts the strap of his satchel once before speaking up, “Uh, Miss Lance?”

It’s not as if he’s never seen the woman around the precinct before, especially as her comings and goings often involved rather loud discussions or arguments with her father, but he’s never had occasion to speak with her. And it’s clear she doesn’t recall him whatsoever by the slight raise of her eyebrow and questioning smile.

“I’m sorry, if there’s something I can help you with I’d prefer you make an appointment. It’s CNRI
“I’m not here cause I need a lawyer,” he insists, though a traitorous part of his brain makes a note that he should really consider it. “I’m actually here to help you. More warn you, really.”

“Warn me?” She echoes, the smile gone from her face, and he realizes he should probably get to the point before she calls in security or, worse, the police.

“That phone you got from Detective Lance, the one with a direct line to the Vigilante,” he elaborates, and she stiffens in her seat. Her eyes go wide as he tells her, “It’s been bugged.”

Her hand almost reflexively twitches, looking about to reach for a desk drawer. She only just restrains herself, choosing instead to stand and looks at him with a critical gaze. “How do you know?”

“I’m a CSI at the station, I overheard him talking with one of the Tech guys—”

“My father planted it?”

Barry winces. He didn’t really want to get into all that, much less reveal his very occupation, but as usual he can’t seem to keep from talking, and really there aren’t many other ways he could have told her how he knew.

“Look, it’s probably better if I just show you. Can I—?” He’s not quite able to finish the request, something about asking for a device that got a person direct access to their city’s resident Vigilante making his mouth go dry. So he settles for extending a hand, and after a pause where Laurel Lance puts him under intense scrutiny, she reaches into the desk drawer and places it in his palm, still eyeing him guardedly.

He’s not sure if she’s expecting him to just run with it or what, but he wastes no time in turning it over, looking for the tiny plug-in and—there! “Standard police surveillance equipment,” he’s telling her easily enough, in more of a comfort zone as he works it free of the phone. “It relays the audio to a receiver in the station, records everything.”

When Barry glances up, though, he finds her lips pulled into a thin line of a frown, eyes hard and glassy, like she’s torn awfully between her rage and sadness. He’s known the feeling. This was clearly something very personal to her—no matter how much she really knows about the Vigilante or how close they are—and that’s been violated. Barry somehow is the one left feeling guilty in all this. He sets the phone down.

“I’m really sorry you had to find out like this.”

“No, I needed to know this,” she’s staying incredibly strong in the face of this betrayal. He’s not sure how he’d fare in her place. “If I’d contacted him and—God, I cannot believe my father.” She shakes her head a moment, collects herself fully, and then asks, “Why did you tell me?”

Barry ducks his head and shrugs, suddenly very uncomfortable all over again and exposed. “I- I guess I didn’t think it would be fair, or right, or—um.” He takes a breath. “I didn’t want him to get hurt. Or you, obviously, but uh—”

Laurel’s expression has softened into a small smile as she sums up, “You believe in him, too.” The absolute warmth and sincerity in her tone really makes him wonder, does she know? Does she know who they’re really talking about? He hopes so because she knows both vigilante and billionaire sides to the man they’re discussing far better than he, and he wants to trust in her assurance.
It even leaves a smile on his face as he admits aloud for the first time, “Yeah. Yeah, I do.” His eyes catch a clock hanging on the wall and he double-checks his own watch in surprise. “But I have to be getting back or I’ll be late, again. I’m only on my break.” He waves a hand at the phone. “Good luck with that.” Then he’s making his way out of the office.

He thinks she follows him at least to the stairs as he hears her call of, “Wait! You never even told me your name!” Well, Barry’s pretty proud of himself he avoided that pitfall at least. The last thing he needs is his name being given to the police, or worse.

It’s worse that decides to find him.

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Oliver’s not sure what to make of Laurel’s latest request to meet up with the Hood. She said over the phone it was important, but to his knowledge all the cases she’s working on are processing fairly smoothly at the moment. He’s not inclined to disappoint her, however, so he leaves Diggle at the foundry and heads to the lawyer’s apartment.

It’s a simple routine now to shut the electricity off and turn on the voice modulator, able to glimpse her getting up from the sofa as he stands in profile, head bowed. “You said you needed to see me,” the Hood’s artificially low rumble of a voice fills the space.

“Yes,” she confirms. “Thank you for your help with the firefighters. I know I’ve said it, but it means a lot to me and the city.” Her open tone and expression, something he only has access to now in these stolen moments, is all he needs, gratitude or no. But Laurel’s never been one to beat around the bush.

“You need to be more careful, though, and so do I. My father knows I have the phone. I thought he was ok with it, but really he- he bugged it. He was going to use me.” Laurel’s voice shakes, and he realizes she’s seething. Oliver wishes he could feel more surprised, but Detective Lance has already proved himself capable of almost anything in the pursuit of the Hood.

What’s important now is assessing the damage, so he checks with some urgency, “You had it removed before contacting me. How did you know the bug had been planted?” Brilliant as she is at her own job, tech is not exactly Laurel’s area of expertise, and she apparently had fallen for her father’s deception at first.

She hesitates. “That’s the weird thing. This guy came to see me at CNRI and said he’d overheard my father talking about it to one of the Tech specialists. He even removed it for me.” She sounds as bewildered as he feels.

“So who was he?” He prompts.

“I didn’t get a name. But he said he worked at the station as a CSI,” Laurel hastens to add, clearly wanting to prove herself. “He was tall, lanky, young with brown hair. I haven’t wanted to go look for him there—I’m not really up to seeing my dad at the moment.” He gets some amusement from the wry tone that’s said in. Laurel sobers up as she continues, “And I don’t want to get him in trouble. He did it for you.” A brief pause, then as if testing the water, “Do you know him?”

Oliver thinks over what she’s described, but it’s fruitless. The Hood’s, and Oliver Queen’s, contact with the police has been pretty much kept to Lance and in brief moments his partner. This man Laurel tells him of is an unknown.

He’s never liked those since the island.
At last he answers, “Not yet.” Steps further back into the shadows and pulls his usual disappearing act, leaving Laurel back in the light. Oliver returns to the foundry.

“You know, if he really is a CSI, means he’d probably be good at cleaning up a crime scene,” Diggle remarks once he’s filled him in. It’s clear what he’s hinting at.

“I’d thought of that,” he replies, sitting facing away from the computer. He turns to it now, pulling up a browser. Slow-going though it is, he gets himself into the personnel files of the station where Lance works. It’s more than worth it, because as he clicks through the files pertaining to the forensics assistants, there’s a face that sticks out in his mind fresh from Laurel’s description.

Allen, Bartholomew Henry. Almost twenty-three years old and a fairly recent hire. Diggle notices him lingering on this page and comes over to have a look.

“This our guy?”

He prints two copies of the file, one to use as confirmation with Laurel and the other his own to study. “One way or the other, I’m going to find out.”

“And then what?” Diggle is almost exuding calm, and it should probably offend him, but Oliver can’t deny he’s been on edge about this whole mystery person since Christmas. Even after regaining the confidence and drive to suit up as the Hood again, he’s constantly been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Now it seems it has, only not in any way he could have expected. He’s not sure if it’s a slipup or a setup.

So he meets the other man’s gaze head-on and states, “Then I learn what ‘our guy’’s intentions truly are.”

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Barry’s been laying low at the station all week, making sure to avoid anything and everything Lance. Thinking back on it, he should have just left the lawyer a note, something completely anonymous. She could’ve decided what to do with the bug on her own. Then he wouldn’t be worrying nonstop that a trip by her to the precinct might lead to some accidental meet-up and then suspicion from the detective of the family and then arrest and a cell right up in Iron Heights with his own father. At least, that’s the inevitable trail his brain leads him down in the moments he has to himself, which are many.

Tonight Barry breathes a sigh of relief as he spots Detective Lance getting into his car from a window. He gathers up his things and heads out for the evening, breathing in the crisp air. It’s that time between winter and spring when everything is just a shade chill but so fresh, and he won’t mind the long walk back to his apartment.

There’s more than a few alleys that he has to cut through on his way home, a fact that would have Joe West in cardiac arrest no doubt, but Barry has yet to be bothered on his commute in either direction. It’s not as if he’s taking a stroll through the Glades.

Which is why he’s completely caught off guard by the sound of something moving fast through the air toward him, a sharp stinging pain in his neck, and the way his vision almost instantly tunnels. He’s got enough presence of mind to slap a hand to his neck, fingers sluggishly moving to grasp the dart embedded there, but then the ground is coming up to have a nice meet and greet with his face and he’s glad that he blacks out just before that.

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He comes to in increments, not really able to tell when it starts. There’s a pounding in his head and the taste of iron in his mouth. He might possibly be swaying but there’s something keeping him tethered upright and it’s making it so he can’t move his arms. Taking an experimental breath produces a tightness in his chest as the bonds wound tight constrict around it. His feet at least are planted on the floor and he tries using that to ground him as he blinks open his eyes.

The first thing Barry registers is a very bright single bulb hanging above him, a cheap but effective spotlight. The floor is concrete and there are in fact ropes around his torso and wrists keeping him tied down to a chair.

It doesn’t take him long to notice the large, green-wearing person standing just outside the pool of light. He sticks out against the blackness of his surroundings just like Barry knew he would. Of course then there’s the realization that this isn’t a photo or a police sketch and that he really is looking across five feet of space at the Hood.

“Oh God,” the words fall from his lips, at once faint and yet loud in the otherwise silent room. Talking makes him aware that the blood in his mouth is from his inside of his cheek. He’s bitten it, perhaps when he fell. No, when he was attacked. The pounding in his head only increases as he strains against the ropes, never mind how much good that will do. The knots hold.

“Bartholomew Allen!” It’s a growl and a shout and definitely the most terrifying way to say his name ever, and Barry jumps as best he can in his seat. “You removed a bug from a phone in the possession of Laurel Lance, which she uses to contact me.”

It’s an accusation and not a question, and so Barry says nothing, only breathes harshly though his nose as he stares at his captor.

“Did you also remove DNA evidence from the Christmas hostage crisis?”

He’s trembling in the chair, he notes dimly, but manages a nod. Then thinks better of it and tries to pitch his voice in the non-fearful range. “Yes.”

“Did you run any of it for analysis?”

And there’s no containing the fear on his face or in his tone as he gapes for a long moment, wordlessly, and then croaks past a sudden lump in a throat dry rough as sandpaper, “…Yes.”

The Vigilante takes a step further back and pivots so his back is almost entirely to him, as if he can deny the answer through such an action, and Barry’s not quite able to process something at first: that he’s maybe not the only one here who’s afraid.

“But you didn’t give the police your results.” It’s soft, almost pondering, until a snarl is sent over the Hood’s shoulder. “Why?”

“I- I don’t—” All of his inner debates, his many reasons that have been turned over and over in his head, fail to appear in the moment, and his trembling’s getting so bad as to start shaking the chair along with it. “Look, please, I know it’s you so can we just—I can’t even start to think like this and it’d be easier if I could- if I could speak to you…” He lowers his head yet keeps his eyes on the broad back of the Vigilante, who hasn’t once looked at him this whole time. Barry tries and fails to imagine the look on the man’s face as he speaks in a hushed tone designed not to carry. “Please, Mr. Queen.”

There’s a very stillness to the air for so long he doesn’t know how much more he can take. Then there’s a faint beep and a single word in a voice that sounds hoarser, smaller, and yet devastatingly
real and human. “Why?”

Barry rests back fully into the chair, not exactly at ease but finally able to consider the requested explanation with a clear head. It’s not a murderous lunatic holding him hostage in a warehouse, it’s a man trying to do the right thing, even if he makes mistakes. Barry just hopes he’s not going to end up one of those.

So he licks his lips and begins, “I’d kind of figured it had to be you before. I only ran the sample to be sure. But I’d already decided not to tell anybody anyway, because—well, because of what you do for the people of this city.”

There’s a brief glimmer in the darkness, the whites of the eyes, and Barry thinks he might have just glimpsed a look of disbelief being thrown at him. “I mean, I don’t know if that’s why you started all this,” he continues, and because he never knows how to shut himself up, keeps right on going with, “and I won’t even try to guess what all must have had to happen on that island for you to want to come back and do this, but the fact that you did? That’s kind of amazing. It’s just really one of the most amazing, inspiring things I’ve ever seen and I couldn’t bring myself to—I couldn’t be the guy who stopped that. Who stopped you. I don’t think you should be stopped and I don’t want you to so—so that’s why, I guess.”

He wonders for a brief moment if in his rush to say all the things he’s been forced to think and feel alone for months he’s laid it on a bit thick, but then the other man is circling the perimeter of light and he hears the slide of something metal out of its casing just as he disappears out of his field of vision. It’d be ridiculous to think he can feel a breath on the back of his neck, him being seated and the other standing, but Barry somehow just knows then that Oliver Queen is standing just behind him, hood still pulled low over his features and probably holding a knife.

Barry contemplates if it’s an insult or a compliment he’s not going to use the arrows, squeezes his eyes shut, and thinks he shouldn’t have moved, he should’ve visited his father more, he should’ve been on time more often to live in and appreciate every moment—

Then the knife slices cleanly through his bonds. It takes him a minute to open his eyes, then another to lower his arms from the position they’d been forced into. By the time he’s thought to turn around and look, he’s the only one there.

On something like autopilot, he stumbles to his feet and to the door, finding his satchel propped up against it. Barry slips the strap over his shoulder, but hugs the bag to him as he steps out into the night, like it’s a pillow instead of where he keeps his laptop and pens and post-it notes.

He’s alive, and there’s a satisfaction there from knowing he’s been right all along, that the Hood isn’t just some killer like Lance assumes, because Barry would be the last person right now a killer would want still walking around and—

It’s like the blank, calm state he’s been in suddenly shatters, and he braces an arm against the wall of the warehouse, not trusting his own quaking legs. His breaths are coming in big gulps of air, like he’d been questioned while running a marathon instead of sitting in a chair, and a cold sweat breaks out over his forehead. Before he knows what he’s doing, his phone is out and he’s dialing a number.

“Barry? What’re you doing up this late?” Joe West doesn’t sound tired, and he thinks he must have caught the detective at his desk at work, pulling a double shift like so many nights past, in his childhood when he’d call because no one was there to sit up in his room until he fell asleep.

It takes him a good couple tries to answer in a voice that sounds remotely like his own. “Oh, um, no reason. I guess I just wanted to hear- I mean to say that- that I—you know I love you and Iris, right?”
“Yeah,” the older man agrees readily, though Barry can practically hear the gears in his head turning. “What’s going on, Barry?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. Really. I’m fine.”

“You want to come home?” It’s almost always an offer his surrogate father makes during their phone calls and while normally it tends to grate on his nerves, at the moment Barry pauses, considers. “Maybe, yeah. For a visit.”

“Well we’d both like that. Iris and I love you too, Bear.”

He’s able to push off the wall now, take the first couple steps away from the building and look around to get his bearings. There’s the beginning of a smile playing at his lips as he answers, “I know.” Joe talks him through the now very, very long walk back to his apartment.

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Oliver slams the lid on his gear with more force than necessary, free hand clenched in a fist. He can’t quite look at Diggle, who’s had the foresight to change into clothes acceptable for a spar. It won’t help, not when the person he wants to punch—is truly, awfully disgusted with—is himself.

And it makes him want to bark a bitter laugh, because after all the things he’s done, the interrogations and tortures and so much more that he doesn’t breath a word about to a soul, not even Dig, this is the thing that causes him guilt?

He spent so much of it facing away from the younger man, but the openness of his tone and the way all those words had spilled as though welling up from inside him even when absolutely gripped with fear, makes Oliver glad he doesn’t have the accompanying visual to tear at him, rip away his carefully composed masks.

Amazing, Allen said. Inspiring. Would that strange stranger still think so if he knew Oliver spent the time waiting for him to wake up determining the quickest, cleanest way to dispose of him if needed? That these are the sorts of things Starling’s supposed hero catalogues in his mind when so much as entering a room?

He’s accepted Dig’s silent offer, and so it’s after a grunt from a good hit that the other man finally speaks up. “Guess you really do have someone in your corner. I told you, Oliver, you can’t keep your activities as the Hood just between you and that list. People just like Allen are seeing what you’re doing. A lot of them are happy about it, grateful—argh!” It’s a groan as Oliver flips him, Dig’s back hitting the mat hard.

“They wouldn’t be if they knew about the list. I’m not doing it for them, whatever he thinks.”

“You might want to change your mind about that,” Diggle persists between pants as he accepts a hand up from Oliver. He walks over to a water bottle he’s set out, takes a swig, and looks him right in the eye. “It’s cause he thinks so that you’re still able to do this.”

“I’m aware,” he states through gritted teeth. He was hoping to feel better after all this, and yet he’s left undoubtedly feeling worse. His identity has been compromised and is in the hands of someone he barely knows, let alone has had time to research, and it could all hinge on some arbitrary scale of whether he’s ‘inspiring’ or not.

For now, though, he’s in the clear. Allen still seemed pretty firm in his conviction that the Hood is
what Starling needs, even when anyone else placed in that position would be feeling the exact opposite, he’s sure. He doesn’t know how the other man reasons that one out, what he saw in Oliver to keep his belief.

He’s so good it hurts. It’s hurting him, when he was the one doing all the lashing out. He can’t seem to get it out of his mind.

He trains that whole night in the foundry, and doesn’t return to the manor till first light. Even then he can’t begin to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so maybe not exactly a meet-cute, but we've got Barry and Oliver interacting together! It gets better, I promise. No really. Let me know what you thought!
He lets himself in—still has a key—and drops the duffel he brought like a sailor making land for the first time in so long. It all just looks and feels and is the same, and he uses the space of a deep breath to just take it all in. “Anybody home?”

A door slams somewhere above his head and from experience he can tell which room, but he’s still unprepared when she appears at the top of the stairs. Iris, radiant and beautiful and smiling down on him and, God, could he have really left this? Barry can’t seem to make himself move, yet she runs down the stairs and launches herself into his arms, and it’s warm and familiar and he can already feel himself sinking right back into it, into her orbit.

“Hey, Bear!”

“Hey,” he echoes softer.

She pulls back, still grinning even as she scolds, “I thought I told you to let me know when your train was getting in. I wanted to pick you up.”

“Well I wanted to walk,” he counters, then shrugs one shoulder. “Missed the first train anyway.”

“Of course you did.” Iris rolls her eyes, then impulsively grabs him in a hug again. “Ohh, I’ve missed you! Seriously, having your best friend live in a different city is killer.”

“Sorry.” It’s conditioned response for him when it comes to Iris. He’s always sorry about something.

She always patiently takes his apology, like now as she reaches for her jacket and pushes at him with her other arm towards the door. “Come on, you can leave your stuff for now. We’re going out, getting food, and maybe drinks later. I’m waiting to see if people want to meet up.”

“What people?” He says on a laugh, wondering just who Iris has tried to round up to see Barry Allen of all people. He’d be content with ordering in a pizza with her and Joe.

“Oh don’t worry, you know them.” She’s gotten them out the door, but pivots, grabs her keys up from the side table, then rejoins him outside. “In the meantime, we have so much to talk about. Tell me about Starling, I want to know everything.”

“Everything?” It’s a perfectly innocent request. But something still twists unpleasantly in his gut. He’s just had a brush with—well he doesn’t like to think it could have been death, but at least some relative level of peril. Probably death. And he called Joe and next thing he knew was requesting vacation days and booking a train to Central. He’s running, Barry knows, all over again and maybe it’s foolish to think it won’t follow him here. But yet he needs the distance, if only for a moment.
So he stares out the window for a while as Iris drives them into the city trying to collect what he’s going to say about his life in Starling—with very careful edits. Barry won’t involve Iris in this whatever he’s started with Oliver Queen. For one thing, Joe would kill both of them. For another, he’s not sure what Iris would even make of his story, the many choices he’s made. She’s not seeing and hearing the changes that are going on in Starling every day because of the Vigilante, and so he can’t expect her understanding on this.

“It’s, um, a bit more densely populated,” he starts at last.

“Densely populated?” Iris is giving him that look that tells him he needs to try harder at being a normal person.

“There’s clubs and things. I mean, I haven’t gone, except for this one case, but I hear about them, too.” Oliver Queen is opening a club, according to the buzz around the station lately. Barry wonders why, it’s not as if the man doesn’t have enough hobbies or anything.

“You don’t go with friends?” She emphasizes the last word in particular, and Barry looks down at his lap. “Barry.”

“It’s not that I don’t have any,” he interjects before she can start. “My coworkers are ok.” It doesn’t sound any less pathetic out loud. He moved to Starling to start a life, and look what it’s gotten him. Stuck sifting through old cases and searching for impossible things in impossible people. It’s not just Central City that’s stayed the same, and with a blinding smile he concedes, “Anyway, you’re still my best friend.”

It pacifies Iris’ disapproval and worry like he hopes, and she’s looping her arm through his once they’ve parked and are walking the city streets deciding where to eat. Drinks do happen, but sans any of the aforementioned people, so Iris chooses instead to complain about them loudly which leads into a long tirade about the many frustrations and frankly crazy people she has to deal with at Jitters which leaves them practically falling over themselves laughing as they exit the bar.

Iris is leaning into him with her head on his shoulder as they walk and it takes everything in him not to react as she breaths on his neck. He’s concentrating on not reacting so much, in fact, that it takes her five tries of, “Hey, Barry?” in varying pitches and volumes for him to recognize that she’s attempting to ask him something.

“Umm, yeah Iris?”

“What’s this?” A finger jabs at a spot on his neck he knows all too well. The puncture mark has closed up and is healing by now, but the skin around it is still bruised, blotchy and yellow. Barry stiffens.

“Nothing. Lab accident.”

Iris bursts into another peal of laughter, apparently finding that hilarious. “What were you even doing?”

“Stuff that’s boring,” he tells her, takes the keys from her hand, and helps her into the passenger seat. “You wouldn’t like it.”

“I wouldn’t like you,” she retorts with a silly grin.

Barry feigns hurt, eyebrows pulling together over wide, sad eyes. “Really? Cause I like you, Iris.”

Her grin widens into a smile. “I know.” Then she sighs, dropping her head back against the seat.
“Wake me up when we get home, mmk? Don’t want you carrying me. You’ll break.”

His eyes aren’t very wide anymore, but still sad. “Yeah, yeah ok.” He starts the car.

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Oliver raises his bow, prepares to fire at the tennis balls. It’s an easy routine but right now he needs something to ground him before getting back to his research on Ted Gaynor, what with the news Diggle’s just delivered. Allen’s skipped town.

His first instinct is to assume that the man’s finding a safe distance before telling all his very valuable information about the Hood. But then two days stretch into three and there’s still no police knocking on the door, still no major exclusive on the news. His instincts when it comes to CSI Allen, have proven wrong again.

Then he thinks Allen’s instincts might instead be dictating this move. Why wouldn’t he flee with his life, while he feels he has the chance? It’s not as if Oliver wouldn’t be able to find him anywhere in Starling, were he to change his mind about cutting the young man’s bonds and letting him walk. It’s not something the hero Allen believes in would do. But maybe he’s taken a valuable lesson from that night. A lesson Oliver’s had to learn many times and taught to others as well: you can’t trust blindly.

Some guardian angel, some hero of the people. He thinks of Christmas, of telling Dig how he’d failed the city that night, and imagines Allen scrambling around in the dark, clearing away his mess and loss, protecting it from the police and holding that secret within him since, until Oliver forced it out of him.

He hasn’t failed the city this time. All the same, as the tennis balls are released, he can’t find it in himself to fire a single arrow.

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It was a stupid idea, thinking he could just leave it. Barry spends the mornings scouring the Central City news channels for mentions of the Hood, and when that frustrates him he takes to the internet for publications from Starling.

Joe notices. “What do you need to keep up with that for? Thought you weren’t on the taskforce they have for this guy.”

He looks away from an article about the Vigilante taking out a group of ex-marines connected to several robberies of armored trucks. “I’m not. Doesn’t mean I can’t be interested, does it?”

“Yeah, well as long as you interest stays on a strictly literary level,” Joe replies, pointing at his laptop screen. “I’m telling you Bear, I’m starting to think no one ought to let their kids live up in Starling the more this lunatic’s body count keeps climbing.”

Barry rolls his eyes, closes the laptop, and moves into the kitchen. “He’s not a lunatic.”

“And you would know that, huh?”

He’s got no reply that won’t implicate somebody, and just keeps rifling through the cupboards. “Can we have waffles for breakfast?”

“Is that you asking me to make them so I’ll stop having this conversation with you?” Let it never be
said Joe West has made detective for nothing.

“No,” Barry still answers, doing his best to sound convincing. “Just kind of want them before I go back.”

Of course that gets back to Iris within the day. “You’re thinking of leaving already?” They’re sprawled out on the couch and had been watching TV he thought, but it’s clear by the troubled frown that she’s been preoccupied far more with this.

Barry shrugs, starts fiddling with the remote and switching channels. “Maybe, yeah. Don’t want to use up all my vacation days in one go, right?”

She snorts and shifts on the couch, tucking her legs under herself, creating a gap between them. “Well it’s not as if you’ve made much use of them before.”

He winces. “Sorry. But I needed the distance.”

“Why, Bear?” It’s so soft, and he wishes he could tell her, just summon up the stupid courage to say it. Because he got too close. Because he had to be away from her to at least try. Because he knows she’s never going to love him in the way he does, and he’d much rather cut the loss on his own terms for once.

But then the name Queen catches his eye, scrolling as a headline banner across the nightly news. Thea Queen, involved in a crash, and reports of the emerging drug Vertigo in her system.

“I should be there,” he says, eyes locked on the screen. It’s like a slap to the face, a wakeup call he didn’t realize he needs, that whatever stress or complications he’s trying to avoid by hiding out here things are still moving and happening and changing in Starling. Whatever the circumstances surrounding this incident, he’s got a pretty good inkling that the Vigilante is about to declare his own war on drugs. And that could get messy.

Though he spends the whole next day in Central with Joe and Iris, Barry packs that night. He doesn’t plan to be late.

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The inside of the car is dark and the shocks are good. Oliver still finds himself squeezing his eyes shut and leaning his head against the cool pane of the tinted window as Diggle makes another turn, everything seeming to spin disturbingly with it. This overdose has really done a number on him, loathe as he is to admit it especially with Dig bringing up talk of hospitalization.

That reminder helps his somewhat sluggish brain realize the turn they’ve made is a left and not a right. “I said no hospital,” he calls up to the front.

“I’m not taking you to a hospital, Oliver,” the other man tells him.

“Well this isn’t the way to Queen Consolidated,” he gets out through gritted teeth.

“Not taking you there, either.” It’s not even close to apologetic.

Oliver absorbs that for a moment before tersely replying, “We need to get this sample of the Vertigo to Felicity, Dig.”

“So she can do what, Oliver, get you the name of the company that made that syringe? Felicity’s great at what she does but if you give her this she’ll need help, and that means involving people we
don’t even know. Not to mention what sort of story you’d have to pull out of thin air this time.”

He can’t find a good counter to that. It’s true, he’s gotten used to depending on Felicity when his tech skills aren’t exactly up to par for a task, but this is completely out of her field. And he’s likely stretched the limits of her patience and compliance with his numerous bad lies far enough, yet he still would rather avoid making her aware of the mission. He feels he can trust her, but is it something she’d even want to be part of? And it would also add just one more person to the alarmingly increasing list of those who know Oliver Queen is the Hood.

It’s this thought that has him sitting up properly, staring out properly as they do a circle around the block containing the police station. “You can’t be serious. He’s not even—”

“Got back in last night.” Diggle meets his eyes briefly in the rearview mirror, then sighs. “Look, Oliver, what happened at the warehouse wasn’t so great.” Oliver scoffs, turns his head back to the window. “But he’s the only guy we know who can get the information we need and won’t be asking awkward questions.”

“And what makes you think he’ll even want to do it, Dig?”

“He obviously wanted to the last couple times. He’s not bolting. Odds are looking pretty good,” the other man says, starting in on another circuit. Diggle slows, though, as a certain young man emerges from the front door of the station. Very relaxed, easy, he’s probably going for coffee or a lunch break. At least until Dig pulls up alongside, stating to Oliver over his shoulder, “Ought to try asking at least.”

He shuts off the car and steps out, the sounds of the city and steady traffic loud and piercing through the somewhat foggy haze of Oliver’s mind for the moments before his friend shuts the front door. Allen stops about a car-length away, probably at the sound of his name. It takes half a second for the man’s expressive features to register recognition and something of surprise. But there’s no delay in the long strides he makes toward Dig.

They’re exchanging words, the angle not good for him to try and read so he prepares to indulge in a brief rest until he catches Diggle motioning back to their car.

Oh. He meant Oliver was asking.

He makes an aborted attempt to reach for the door handle, aborted only because Dig’s already opening the other one for Allen and he honestly doesn’t know if he’s got the ability to dodge traffic at the moment. He isn’t able to glimpse Allen’s face until the other settles in and starts taking off the large side bag he seems to always carry with him. It’s as he’s setting it down in the remaining footspace between them that the young man seems to register Oliver’s presence at all, or at least his shoes. Then his gaze travels up, jumping to Oliver’s face.

Shock. Apprehension. Then at the sound of the engine, some absurd resignation, like he’s used to being cornered by possibility dangerous people. Admirably, he does his best to cover that last one up as they pull away from his workplace, giving a nervous grin. “So this isn’t suspicious or anything. I mean we’re not reenacting some scene in a mafia movie, are we?”

“Not today that I’m aware of.” It’s Diggle who answers, smirks at Oliver in the rearview mirror. Allen’s head turns back to the front and he manages a laugh that’s short, breathy, and not quite bordering on hysteria. But he’s soon looking at Oliver again, eyes wide and earnest.

“Um, then what…?”
“You came back.” That’s not really anything Oliver meant to say, but now he has.

Allen blinks. “From my vacation? I was only out a few days, why—oh!” He gets it now, beginning to rapidly shake his head. “I wasn’t trying to—you didn’t think I was that it was permanent, did you?”

He’s giving the other man a tight, closed smile before he even realizes it, says, “It wouldn’t have been an irrational response.”

Allen draws in a breath, calms enough to look him right in the eye. “Well I’m not. Irrational or leaving. And I’m not going to tell anybody, so if that’s what this is about then you don’t need to worry or anything.”

It’s not said in fear or a plea to be let out and left alone. It’s sincere, even considerate, and it strikes Oliver that Allen is reassuring him. Him, after everything he’s put this man through.

“I see.” He can feel Diggle’s gaze, a silent reminder that they’re here for more than this stunningly easy accord. “But I’m here to ask something else of you, if you’re up for it.” Oliver watches Allen’s expression, which stays open and curious as he takes out their sample in a syringe. “This is a concentrated dose of Vertigo.”

The younger man takes it carefully, studying the liquid within. “How did you even get this? Wait.” Those eyes snap back up to him, incredulous. “That was really you at the drug bust? I heard Detective Hall saying she saw you but I didn’t know if it was true or not.”

“That’s been resolved,” he interjects smoothly. “Now I need to know where this sample came from, where the Count is manufacturing his product. Can you do that?”

Allen nods. “Yeah, in my lab.”

“You can’t tell the police,” he stresses, needing to make it clear just what he’s asking. “And I will be acting on the information you give me.”

“I know,” the younger man agrees. Then gives a wry smile. “Anyway, trying to explain where I got Vertigo from would get pretty awkward.”

He leans forward, making room in his satchel for the sample. A car pulls out in front of theirs and Dig is forced to slam on the brakes. Oliver snags Allen’s arm and yanks him back towards him before he can go pitching forward.

“Sorry about that,” Diggle calls back as several other cars make their displeasure known through honking.

“We’re fine, Dig.” Oliver states, switching his grip to Allen’s shoulder as the other man gives a little shake of the head.

“Yeah, just forgot my seatbelt. Thanks.” He’s smiling again, sort of up at Oliver because of the angle, until his brow furrows and he asks, “Are you ok? You don’t look so good.” He supposes the dim lighting makes it difficult to see his more haggard features unless up close. “Less good than normal, I mean, cause I’m not saying you look bad. Or not that kind of bad, just sort of, um—”

“High?” Diggle supplies, like it’s helpful.

The young man looks at Dig first in disbelief, then back to him as if needing confirmation. “There were some complications due to the bust,” Oliver elaborates.
“Oh man. How are you even having a conversation right now, that stuff’s practically lethal! You need a serious detox. I can try, I don’t know, some of the stuff in my lab might make a good counteragent.”

“The location comes first,” Oliver persists, remembering at last to drop his hand, and leans back into his seat. “What’s important is stopping the Count before Vertigo can harm anyone else.”

Allen leans back to, cocks his head and gives him a dubious look. “You really don’t get how drug trafficking works, do you?”

Up front, he thinks he hears Diggle fake a cough over a laugh. Oliver splits his time staring them both down, and Allen at least drops the flat, unimpressed tone from his voice as he switches topics. “Is your sister feeling any better at least? I know she’s why you’re doing this.”

“I thought I was doing this for the people of the city?” He remarks, unthinking, then stiffens. They’ve just barely skirted around addressing that night in the warehouse and here he is bringing it up like a joke.

But Allen’s smile shows only the slightest strain as he counters with, “Well last I checked she falls under that category. And anyway, she’s your sister. Not like it’s against the rules to have personal reasons for engaging in vigilantism.”

“I’ve never checked the rules,” he can’t help replying, and now Allen lets a sort of surprised breath out on a laugh.

“Well if I let you off here?” Diggle speaks up once more. They’re around the corner from police headquarters.

“Oh, yeah this works. Um, I’ll see what I can get you, but how do I…?”

“Dig can give you his number,” Oliver decides. The car’s stopped so his friend provides the requested information.

Allen grabs up his bag, shifts on the seat with fingers curled around the door handle. “I will have this for you as soon as possible. Um, in the meantime you should try sleeping and drinking plenty of water. Especially if you’re really sure about taking on the Count.”

“I’ll be fine.” It’s not up for debate and the other man seems to realize that. He looks down and makes to open the door. “But I will take the advice. Just do your work so I can do mine.”

“Ok,” Allen nods once. Then firmer, “Ok. Soon as possible, promise.” Oliver’s treated to one final flash of a smile before he exits the car, jogging down the pavement to a side entrance of the building and almost knocking several people over with his giant bag.

But then they’re pulling away as he enters the police station. Oliver turns back to facing the front in time to catch Diggle watching him again. “What?”

The other man shrugs. “Went better than I was expecting. You?”

“I wasn’t exactly expecting it,” he points out, reaching a hand up to massage at the bridge of his nose. It seems he’s gotten past the feeling of wanting to just collapse at least.

“That seems to be the case more often than not with him,” Dig notes, sounding amused. “I wasn’t expecting you to say more than ten words. Had to widen our circle.”
“He talks a lot.” He doesn’t think he’s blaming Allen for anything, but then again there’s nothing about himself he needs to defend to Diggle.

Dig concedes that point with a nod. “Yeah. Well, my phone number or not, I don’t think you should write off talking to him anymore just yet. We can’t exactly do this every time something comes up.” There’s no room for argument that something else might come up. It’s incredibly, frustratingly true.

“I’ll think about it,” he finally states, shutting his eyes and resting his head back. “But nothing is happening until he delivers, and I bring the Count down.”

He wishes there were rules he could’ve looked at; vigilantism really is starting to get far too personal for his liking.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so we have a tentative alliance starting to form! For all you Felicity lovers, do not worry, I am one of you. She will be in the story. In this universe, however, Dig is right in that it would make far more sense to have a forensics expert rather than an IT expert analyze a drug sample. I'm not even sure how Felicity actually did that in the canon episode. -shrugs-
Either way, I hope you enjoyed and I would love to hear any and all thoughts!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Ok, out a bit later than I planned, but here's a new chapter for you all. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He shuts the door to his lab, wonders if that’s suspicious, opens it back up, then decides, no really, he doesn’t want anyone just dropping by for a surprise visit right now, and shuts it again. He’ll just have to work fast, that’s all.

Barry pushes aside the files he’d left for after lunch—or not-lunch, as the case appears to be—and gets to work transferring the drug he’s been given from syringe to a test tube, glad his hands remain steady. It’s just—looking at this solution, a chemical cocktail he’s been asked to unravel the secrets of like any other job but not—that really happened. Oliver Queen contacted him, again, and for more than just checking him out. In the sizing-him-up sort of way, not the other. Whatever.

The point stands that this time, there’s far more to it. Demands have still been made of him, true, and even drugged up on Vertigo without the hood and Arrows, Starling’s Vigilante still makes it quite clear he expects them to be met. But it’s a different kind of demand. One for help. And he really never even dreamed it might come to this, but Barry’s more than happy to oblige.

He’s waiting for the tests he’s been running while he thinks to be completed and so finally gets around to filling out those remaining forms. He’ll wait to turn them in, however, because it’d be unbelievably risky not to mention irresponsible to leave this unattended. This is one job he’s determined not to even remotely foul up. Because it’s not out of the realm of possibility that this could maybe be a test.

The sun is still in the sky but low when he gets the results on the components of the Vertigo and cross-references them to recent bulk shipments into Starling City. He gets out his phone.

“John Diggle.”

“Mr. Diggle, hi,” Barry begins, unable to help glancing over his shoulder at the closed door a couple times. “I was able to trace shipments of the components of Vertigo to an abandoned juvenile detention center. If there’s any manufacturing going on in Starling, it’ll be there. I can send you the address. Oh, and this is—”

“As soon as you can do that would be great. Good work,” Diggle cuts across calmly. It’s hard to get a gauge on if he’s impressed or not, and Barry reminds himself that was never a guarantee.

He doesn’t do as requested as soon as possible, however, because he opts to ask, “How is he?”

There’s a pause. “Better.”

“But not good,” Barry surmises. “He’s going to go out there anyway, though, isn’t he, once I send you this. If something happens…” He can’t finish.

Diggle does, but not in the way he would have. “Then it’s not on you. That’s his choice. But it’s one you’re going to have to let him make. Comes with the job.”
“I hadn’t realized I’d been hired.”

The other man seems to read the question in that, for he says, “That’s something he’s aware needs to be discussed. For now, if you could send what you’ve got.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Yeah, ok.” From there it’s a matter of a quick text and some tidying up to remove his work from his lab and place it in the hands of the Vigilante. Barry lingers in his lab late into the night, knowing it’s his best shot at finding out what will result as soon as he can. Word finally comes in from Lance and Hall’s team that the Count has been found incapacitated by the Hood, and he thinks he’s rarely felt so relieved and grateful and proud. He’s helped Oliver Queen, resident Vigilante, take down a drug lord, and nobody else was hurt in the process. It’s practically euphoric, and he knows he needs to get out of the station now before anybody notices the ear-to-ear grin taking permanent residence on his face.

He sets his alarm ten minutes later than usual, his own little congratulations. It’s the most he can really expect to receive anyway.

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Barry completely forgets about Mr. Diggle’s comment regarding an upcoming discussion until he gets a text late the next morning:

Big Belly Burger in the Glades at 9?

He stares for a long moment at the words. As far as rendezvous meet-ups went, this seems like an odd location. But mostly he’s trying to get his suddenly jittery fingers under control in order to type an Ok back. Resists the urge to ask why. Doesn’t resist the urge to look at his watch, which is telling him he has to wait almost ten hours to find out.

Well there goes today as far as police work productivity is concerned.

He alternates between excitement and dread, which seems to be his default condition more often than not these days so much that he’s typed the symptoms into a WebMD browser. Nothing helpful comes up. Just him, then.

The excitement right now he understands. He’s meeting a vigilante and his—assistant? associate? backup?—friend will do, to discuss…something. It’s exciting. He can barely keep still, much less have a normal conversation with the M.E.’s assistant who brings up some off-white gritty substance for analysis that they found under the fingernails of a homicide victim brought in two days ago. It looks like chalk dust.

The dread is a little more complex to parse out. Barry’s decided, quite firmly, that Oliver Queen’s work as the Vigilante is good for the city and justifiable, even what happened at the warehouse. Doesn’t mean the memory of it doesn’t still terrify him. He wishes it didn’t, it’d be so much easier if it didn’t. And he reminds himself that even if Oliver Queen got it in his head that Barry was dangerous enough to do that to again, a Big Belly Burger would hardly be the place for it. Maybe that’s why they picked it, really, to allay any anxiety he might still have. He ought to just calm down and appreciate the gesture.

Barry bounces the heel of one foot up and down as he peers into the lens of the microscope. It is chalk dust.

And despite repeated checking of the clock and leaving with over half an hour to spare, he’s unable to flag down a taxi. Barry half-runs, half-walks it to the fast food joint, takes a deep breath before entering, and finds the pair he’s to meet with seated at one of the booths along the far wall, eating and talking like normal people. Which they are, and he knows that, but it’s just—wow.
He gets only five steps into the place before Oliver Queen’s eyes jump from his food to Barry, and track his progress to their booth. It’s actually quite like some wild predator watching the movement of his prey, so really there’s not much difference between him and the burger at this point. Barry tries to dismiss that thought as he manages a somewhat breathy sounding, “Hi.” He tells himself it’s because of the long walk.

“You’re late,” Oliver Queen informs him, arms crossed, and truthfully he was expecting it. The other man still nods to indicate he should take a seat, which also helpfully solves the unexpected drama of whether to choose the spot next to Oliver Queen or across from him. He squeezes in next to Diggle as directed, who gives a slight nod in greeting.

“I couldn’t get a cab,” Barry says by way of explanation, and does his best to look contrite.

It seems to work as the other man leans forward, elbows braced on the table. “Well try not to make it a habit.”

He’s never really been in the business of making promises he can’t keep, so Barry instead asks, “Is this, gestures between them with a finger, “going to be a habit?”

“I’ll be honest with you—your help on this case was invaluable,” Oliver Queen can’t quite meet his eyes as he says it, and Barry tries not to grin too broadly at the thank you he’s otherwise never going to hear. “I feel, and Dig agrees, that’s something I can’t just ignore.”

Barry looks at Diggle, who offers the briefest of closed-mouth smiles, and by the time he’s turned back Oliver Queen is leaned about as far forward over the table as can still look impressive and not awkward. “So in return, I need your honesty. You say you don’t want me to be stopped. Is that the extent of it?”

Barry blinks.

Beside him, Diggle clears his throat, shifts slightly. “What Oliver means is, you’ve helped us for more than just a cover up on this case. Is that something you’d be interested in doing on a regular basis?”

He thinks he must have fallen asleep at work and dreamed all this up, somehow, because there’s no way he can be hearing this right. “You want me to help you with your vigilante-ing?”

The Vigilante in question’s mouth turns down in a frown, and there’s a slight shake to his head. “It’s not—that’s not even a word.”

“Then what’s the verb for being a vigilante?”

Oliver Queen opens his mouth, shuts it, looks for half a second like he’s simply about to just get up and walk away from this conversation. Then there’s a pause. “I take it you’re in.”


“This isn’t going to be fun and games,” the other man cautions. “Your proximity to the police, while helpful, is always problematic for one thing. I won’t ask you to be an informant, per se—”

“But maybe a heads up the next time they’re going to bust your fake drug deals?” He finishes. Oliver Queen nods, then checks his watch. “Are you expecting somebody else? Didn’t realize this was the place the rich and famous have their off-the-books meetings.”

He should really learn to stop running his mouth, if the look Oliver Queen is fixing him with says
anything. The man’s probably seriously reevaluating his decision to even talk to Barry right this second. But then he finally leans back against the booth, affects a shrug. “The food and service are good. And yes, I have another engagement, so I will have to send you ahead with Dig.”

“Ahead where?”

“I certainly don’t conduct all my business here. If you’re going to be working with me, it’s impractical for you not to know where to find me.” He nods to the door. “I’ll be along.”

Diggle’s waiting for him to be able to exit the booth, so Barry slides out but lingers at the table. “Ok, um—ok. See you soon, uh…Mr. Queen?” He tries, on a grimace. They’ve skipped over introductions somewhere in this strange association they’ve cultivated, so it seems the safest option. Except the other man grimaces, too. “I am not Mr. Queen. Oliver will do fine, uh—” And it’s probably some kind of rare, once in a million years sight to see the billionaire vigilante to stumble over his own words. But stumble he does, eyeing him uncertainly as he asks, “Do you actually go by that?”

“What?” Barry blinks, then gets it in the next moment. “Oh! No, no I do not. It’s Barry, just Barry. Never—you know.” He can’t help laughing a little, and to his surprise it pulls a smile and the barest huff of a laugh from Oliver—just Oliver. Barry holds out his hand, and Oliver grips it tightly and shakes.

Mr. Diggle is waiting by the door, however, and so Barry hurries after him out into the parking lot. He gets into the passenger seat of the familiar-looking car, unable to help a shake of the head as they pull away from the restaurant.

“We’re doing this all wrong, aren’t we?”

Diggle spares him a glance before returning his gaze to road. “Seems alright to me so far.” Barry smiles out the passenger window.

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Oliver reaches the foundry after his meeting with Felicity, the copy of the list she gave him tucked away in a pocket. Even knowing that his father didn’t create the list doesn’t make the shock of finding another copy, and one in his mother’s possession, any less. He’s not sure he wants to think about what that means just yet.

So it’s something of a welcome distraction when he stops at the top of the stairs to see their guest turned new recruit is still in fact present. Barry, Barry Allen. It suits him far better than his full name, and far better than Ollie fits Oliver anymore. He’s twenty-three, looks twelve, and is currently exploring from one end of his base of operations to the other like it’s the new playground.

He frowns to himself, brings up the long list of reasons he’s comprised in his head—and ok, with Dig’s help—for why this is a good idea. Better to keep an eye on him, if only to make sure he avoids suspicion from others or doesn’t accidentally slip up; his in at the police station is useful, for coordinating things to better avoid the police, if nothing else; other than the odd jobs they give Felicity they have little to no technical experts, they’ve mostly been relying on firepower which is insufficient; he’s already more than proven his worth from a tactical standpoint; he’s good.

Oliver doesn’t know why that last one means so much to him, or why he even thinks it. There’s little that’s truly good in Starling.

To be fair it also isn’t simply childish wonder that lights Barry’s face as he looks around. He’s clearly
studying everything with a keen eye. Diggle’s watching with a casual stance, but he’s planted himself in front of his box from the island, and as their eyes meet Oliver gives a single nod in gratitude.

“Is it what you expected?” He finally makes his presence known. Barry jumps, spins around, and looks up at him with a grin and an easy shrug.

“I don’t really know what I was expecting. Definitely not to be here.” He’d debated both with Diggle and in his head whether Barry should ever be here. But the fact is that it’s the only truly safe place they can discuss Hood-related business.

“What did Felicity want to see you about?” Dig speaks up, and it’s deliberate. He could’ve waited until Barry had left for the night, but his friend doesn’t like it when Oliver keeps things from him so it was unlikely he’d let the younger man receive similar treatment if he can help it.

Oliver comes down the steps proper, taking out the notebook and giving it a little shake as he explains, “She wanted to give me this. Apparently, Walter found it amongst my mother’s belongings and was having Felicity look into the matter.”

Diggle’s eyes widen for a moment before he checks, “It’s got the list?” Oliver nods.

“Sorry, what list?” He has to give this to the Barry, the younger man never fails to reinsert himself into the conversation.

Oliver places the copy on the table near his computer and walks around Dig to the box. From it, he retrieves what is likely only another copy but to his mind will always be the original. With it in hand, he approaches Barry. “Before I was stranded on the island, my father gave me a list of names, people who had failed this city. Bringing these people to justice and righting their wrongs is what I do as the Hood.” He watches the other carefully as he states, “That’s the mission; all there is to it.”

This has to be it, the deal breaker. Oliver should have just led with this, in all honesty, because it would have saved a whole lot of trouble. Barry’s support of his activities stems from his belief in the selfless good he does for the city. Now, confronted with the reality that it’s simply not the case, he might very well take back his agreement to help. And then he’s right back to worrying about how much else the younger man might change his mind on.

But Barry cocks his head slightly to the side, a single eyebrow raised and in that same dubious tone like Oliver’s just said something fundamentally incorrect, asks, “Really? The Count made it into your father’s five plus years old hit list?”

His mouth tightens into the line of a stern frown. “As you pointed out, that was a special case.”

“Well how about the Restons? Or Garfield Lynns?”

He can practically feel Dig’s smirk on the back of his head. “Your point?” He asks Barry.

The man just smiles, like he knows something Oliver doesn’t, and he can’t help despairing thinking —it’s always going to be like this, isn’t it?

“You’ve made my point.”

He thinks no one has a right to be so foolishly brave and confident in the face of someone they know has been and could be dangerous to them. That he shouldn’t encourage it. But the frown doesn’t hold and his gaze, though intently focused, has no heat of anger. “We’ll see.”
Then he turns, walks back to the table where he sets the two books side by side. The wear and tear is obvious in his copy but aside from that they are the same. “The Dark Archer from Christmas was hired by the maker of these lists, which my parents have both had access to.”

“But when Walter started looking into it, he disappeared,” Diggle states. There’s something in the tone of it he doesn’t like, and the solemn stare he’s greeted with when he looks up doesn’t help. “Seems like your mother might know more about that than she’s letting on.”

“She is not involved.” The reply is curt, tense, with no room for debate. Dig still looks about to counter, a stubborn set to his jaw and the subtle shift in his stance.

“Maybe not like how you both seem to be concluding,” Barry pipes up. He appears nervous now and Oliver thinks, this might have more to do with the fact of his and Diggle’s growing argument than any of the content. It’s a shaky, new alliance they’ve built, and he’s used to the two of them presenting a more united front than this.

Oliver takes in a deep breath through his nose and unclenches the fists he’s unconsciously formed, nods for the scientist of their group to continue. Best to see how he’ll contribute from the start, if nothing else.

“Do we know if Mr. Steele approached your mother with his findings? I mean, if he was having someone else privately look into it, she might not realize the connection. It might be best to just talk to her first, get an idea of what she knows about Mr. Steele’s investigation?”

Oliver thinks Barry will contribute quite nicely.

“Yes, it might. Which I will do as her son, Dig. There is no reason to visit her as the Hood.” He’s still all manner of conflicted thoughts, emotions, regrets about his initial method of attack on Barry, and the repercussions are playing out right in front of him now. Oliver doesn’t dare to imagine the enormity of the guilt he’d feel about doing the same to his own mother.

Barry affords him a little smile, like he knows his train of thought, while Dig nods in agreement.

“Then I guess we’re done here for tonight,” his friend states. The tension in the room eases at that pronouncement, and all three head to the stairs.

Barry’s looking curiously around the construction site of the Verdant as they pass through and so he explains, “I needed a reason to be in the area.”

“Right,” he nods. Then a grin tugs up one corner of his mouth. “So you do drug deals, proposition people in the back of your chauffeur-driven car, and run a business as a front for something else. Are you really sure we’re not in a mafia movie?”

Oliver rolls his eyes. “It was a fake deal, you know that.”

“Still got busted.”

“If you’ll both wait, the chauffeur needs to pull the car around,” Diggle interjects, tone giving nothing away though his eyes crinkle in amusement.

“Oh, I wasn’t calling you a chauffeur, Mr. Diggle,” Barry is instantly back to fumbling, and it’s amazing how someone can be so self-assured in one second only to swing to the opposite side of the spectrum in the next. “I mean, you do seem to do the driving, but that’s not—”

“All part of the cover, Barry. And you can drop the ‘Mr.’”
Dig does start ahead of them and so Barry has to call after, “Ok!” He glances Oliver’s way once, shoves his hands in his pocket. “I guess I’ll be going?”

Oliver eyes him in disbelief. “It’s the middle of the night in the Glades. We drove you out here, we’ll drop you off. Where do you need?”

“My apartment? Or maybe a couple blocks away so that doesn’t look weird? I don’t have a car waiting around anywhere or anything.” Oliver remembers the comment about a cab, closes his eyes. This is going to be a common occurrence, isn’t it? “So, is there like a time you need me to be here by each day?”

That has him opening his eyes. “This isn’t a nine-to-five with hours and time cards. Whenever you can get away from your work without it looking suspicious. We’re here most evenings and nights, and we’ll call you if something unexpected comes up.”

“Oh, ok. Do you need my number?”

He could just get it from Dig, but the other man’s pulled up in front of them now and it’ll be a long drive. He slides in after Barry and drops his phone in the other man’s lap. When it’s handed back to him, the new contact simply reads Barry.

They drop him off a few blocks from his apartment as he recommends. “Thanks again, for all this.” The younger man lingers with the door held open, like he thinks once he’s shut it that’s it, that this will all go away. For whatever reason, he clearly doesn’t want that.

So Oliver just nods and says, “See you tomorrow.” The smile that garners is far wider than such a statement should warrant. He always seems to get more than he should from Barry.

The door is shut, but Dig idles for a few moments while they watch him round the corner. It’s close to midnight now, a relatively safe neighborhood, and he’s a young man who doesn’t look to be very well-to-do. Barry should be fine.

Dig meets his gaze in the rearview mirror. “Should I trail him?”

“If you would.”

Chapter End Notes

And so the team is coming together! Felt like I needed to make this it’s own chapter, so we won’t really have Barry’s first official adventure on Team Arrow till next time. I’m trying to avoid doing line-by-line repeats of scenes, but if there is any dialogue you recognize, it isn't mine. Let me know what you thought, and thanks for reading!
Even as he feels like things are finally going his way—he’s finally starting to understand how and why Oliver does his work as the Vigilante, he’s finally doing more with his life than simply sitting around or researching or waiting for some sign—that hangs something of a shadow over it. Barry’s grateful, of course, for this chance, for Oliver and Dig to even think he’s worth it. For most of his life, Joe and Iris have been the only ones who thought so. But with the Wests all the way in Central and the divide he’s voluntarily placed between himself and his work colleagues, it’s very easy to feel the outsider. And when the other two men have disagreements—such as the one currently being hashed out—that becomes even more apparent.

Barry keeps to the chair by the computer, tries to sink into it even, as Diggle restates his point. “All I’m saying, Oliver, is that if it were anyone else you’d already be hooding up by now.”

“She only burned the notebook because she is worried, for my safety and Thea’s. That’s hardly something I can blame her for.”

The ‘she’ in question being Oliver’s mother. At least Barry’s not alone in having family drama.

He understands what Dig’s trying to say, and sure, if the situation was reversed Oliver would probably be advocating the same thing. From what Barry’s grown to know, he’s a careful man, always working to ensure the success of his mission despite the high costs. But a part of him is relieved to know from the start, there are some measures the Vigilante is not willing to take.

Oliver looks rather relieved himself at the buzzing of the secured line to Laurel Lance, and Barry sits up in interest as the other man takes the call.

He keeps it short, curt, and impersonal, belatedly letting Barry know just how connected the Hood is with the lawyer. Any thought that the phone was just for appearances and that Laurel might know her infrequent ally’s identity is dispelled. Perhaps he should have realized such already, but in all the excitement the woman had slipped his mind.

Now he has to refocus as Oliver hangs up and turns to him. “Barry, what do the police know about Cyrus Vanch?”

It’s a name he’s heard before, linked in a homicide he’d helped process in the lab months ago, and it takes just a moment for it all to come back to him. “Uh, he’s a gangster, but a bit meaner than your average. He was put away for drug running, human trafficking, racketeering, and murder. They were actually surprised the charges held as long as they did cause he was pretty well connected, but things in his trial got tricky after all the stuff with the Huntress messed up the Bertinellis and the Triad. So, you know, good job.” He flashes what he hopes is an encouraging smile.

“Laurel says he’s out.”

The smile drops. “Yeah. Well, on a technicality. But that’s what happens…” He doesn’t bother hiding the bitterness and frustrations he feels at such times towards the legal system.

And Oliver gets it if his grim, “Not this time,” is anything to go by. Dressed in the green leather suit already, he simply grabs up bow and quiver, making for the stairs. “I'll be collecting evidence for Laurel.”
“You sure you aren’t just avoiding the evidence for your own case?” Diggle calls after the man, but the only response is a slamming door. There’s something of a pause as the former army man shakes his head. He then glances at Barry. “How do you even remember all that?”

Barry shrugs. Then, before he can help himself, “So, Laurel. Is she his partner? His helper?”

Dig’s face twists into a frown. “More like his distraction. Hell, if it weren’t for you I guess Detective Lance would be gearing up right now, wouldn’t he?” Barry’s eyes go wide at the reminder, thinking of Kelton back at the precinct with an open channel to a bug that will never return any information. “His mother’s not the only person who can cloud his judgment.”

“Ohh no, you’re not tricking me into picking sides,” Barry counters, pushing back in the chair a few inches and stretching out his limbs. It’s not exactly comfortable, the foundry, but easily more spacious than his lab at the precinct.

“There’s no sides, Barry,” Dig tells him, though he doesn’t meet the man’s eyes. “There’s just having your teammate’s back, looking out for them. You’ve been doing that for Oliver long enough to know he doesn’t always like that.”

Barry slumps forward, places his head in his hands a moment and tries to think it through for once as opposed to just spewing the half-formed thoughts of his answer. He runs both hands through his hair, leaves them to rest at the base of his neck as he finally looks up at Diggle. “I know. And everything I did before I met you guys, I still stand by it no matter who likes it or doesn’t. But this is his mother, Dig. I’m not going to tell him he’s wrong about her. I can’t.”

He hopes the man might understand without him needing to say anymore or explain just why he, like Oliver, is willing to overlook some of Moira Queen’s admittedly odd actions for the time being. That he can’t think of anything worse than becoming that person who refuses to believe.

Either way, Dig sighs and lets the matter go.

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If he thinks he’s dodged a sticky family situation last night, he walks right into another one the next day. He’s been marginally relaxed at work; Lieutenant Pike has reassigned Detective Lance and while the Vigilante taskforce might not be officially disbanded, it seems even the police are starting to acknowledge that the Hood is not such a bad person. He’ll tell Oliver when the man’s in a better mood.

Right now, Barry has no problem bringing some files down to the bullpen that he and his fellow CSIs have compiled. It’s as soon as he approaches the open door that he realizes his timing couldn’t be worse.

“I guess I’ve been too busy to come around, dad.” It’s Laurel Lance herself, clearly on some kind of business for her legal aid office, but looking harried under her father’s disbelieving gaze.

“That’s never kept you from poking your nose around here before. And you haven’t answered any of my calls in, well, it must be coming on weeks now, Laurel—”

Her eyes have narrowed on the word ‘call’ and it’s like that’s the switch that makes her snap. “Well maybe I’ve been worried about who else might be listening in!” The truly gob smacked expression on Detective Lance’s face might be worth the heart attack it gives Barry. Laurel scoffs at it at least. “Did you really think I wasn’t going to find out, dad? I mean, what were you planning to say when I did? I’d really love to hear your explanation for trying to use me, your own daughter, as bait for your
“Who told you about the bug?” Detective Lance looks panicked, but that’s all lost on his daughter.

She throws her hands up. “Right, because that’s what you’re worried about!” Most of the other officers in the room are doing great impressions of furniture at the moment, at once ignoring and also forced to witness the spectacle occurring. Barry’s just about frozen in the hallway.

The detective still tries to insist, “Laurel, I’m worried about you!”

“Yeah, well you sure have a funny way of showing it.” She turns away from the man and just about struts to the door, head held high. Barry barely has the presence of mind to back up.

Unfortunately he collides with the wall behind him somewhat loudly. It draws her eye and she stops short. “Hey,” she says softly, surprised in that way that’s neither good nor bad but just is.

He’s saved from answering, not by any maneuvering on his part, but by Detective Hilton heading out into the front hall. “Allen, great. Drop those off and grab your gear, we got a crime scene.”

“Uh, yes sir,” he replies, ducking around both him and the lawyer to drop off the files, and tries to ignore the feeling of Laurel’s eyes on his back for a long moment. By the time he glances back, nervously, she’s gone.

The older Lance hardly looks up from his position standing with his hands braced on his desk and his eyes fixed on the wood. Barry places a toxicology report on the furthest corner and retreats, though he catches the, “Need to see Kelton,” that falls from the detective’s lips. He doesn’t much like it.

But Barry is stuck in a squad car with Hilton on the way to a jewelry store robbery, and so he has to keep his misgivings to himself; the man tends to hover in curiosity as he works and so texting Dig, or worse Oliver, is out of the question. He tries not to worry too much. After all, Lance could have just meant he was going to berate the CSU for not realizing their plan had been foiled.

It’s a vain hope, of course. When they get back night has fallen and the bullpen is almost eerily quiet. Pike is even missing from his office. Hilton radios one of the others and Barry waits in the hall rather than bother the few remaining.

“Sounds like Lance is still gunning for the Hood. They tracked his daughter to the Winnick Building.” The man shakes his head in obvious disapproval. “I’ve got to head out to help set up a perimeter, so just have any analysis for me by tomorrow.”

“Right.” He nods. Watches Hilton leave, then takes the stairs two at a time, dumps his bag, and bolts all the way back down and out the side door, all the while calling Diggle. “Tell me Oliver’s not at the Winnick Building,” he demands as soon as the other man picks up.

“He might be, but he’s turned off his communicator. Why?”

It’s all Barry has to hear to get him charging out of the alley and down the street, trying to explain all the while, “Lance found out Laurel knows about the bug, so he had her tailed, and now I think they’re setting up an ambush. I gotta go!”

“Go where? Barry—” But he hangs up, too busy trying to pull up the quickest route to the Winnick Building on his phone to pick up when Diggle tries calling back. All he knows is that Oliver could be in danger and that as usual puts his body into overdrive and his mind narrowed to the thoughts of help him, save him. Whether or not he knows how this time.
Oliver watches Laurel cradle the arrow and its recording of Vanch’s goals, all the evidence she
needs. He told her the Hood isn’t in the business of gathering evidence, but as it is this has proved a
welcome alternative to what Dig would rather he be doing at the moment.

Since he’s lingering, she looks back up and says, “You know, I saw him again today.” He’s not sure
if she’s simply making conversation or trying to repay him with intel of her own, but regardless she
continues. “The CSI, Allen. You had me confirm his picture, so did you ever check up on him?”

It’s like his mind goes blank. She knows. She knows Barry; his name, his face, his job, and his likely
connection to the Hood. Admittedly there’s nothing about that which would link to Oliver Queen,
but it’s more, far more, than he ever wanted her to know. It’s too close.

He can’t guess what she reads in his non-answer, but Laurel adds, “It’s funny now I think about it.
I’d finally let my father have it about the bug when I saw him.”

That snaps him back into reality. “The Detective knows you’ve had the bug removed?” It’s an
eventuality he’s prepared for, but preferably with more warning than this. Because Lance is unlikely
to just let that go, and that provides a whole new set of complications in his dealings, particularly
with Laurel. It’s painfully obvious he needs to regroup and he takes a step to the side as he switches
on the communicator.

Longshot or not, he’s guessed right that Dig still thinks he’s worth the trouble, and he just catches the
end of, “—listening, then get the hell out of there!” The system in the foundry must register the
channel’s been reopened, because that’s followed by a more coherent, “Oliver, it’s an ambush!”

That’s all the warning he gets before both doors to the roof are kicked open and police swarm the
rooftop, Lance leading one team and Lieutenant Pike the other. “Freeze!” Comes the command. He
only has one other option, and he doesn’t hesitate in taking it. Laurel’s possibly more surprised when
he roughly yanks her in front of him than by the sudden appearance of her father and what seems
half the force.

“Lower your weapons!” Detective Lance sounds strangled, torn as he is between blind rage and
panic.

“I’m sorry,” is all the Hood can give the lawyer before he takes the window of opportunity he’s
afforded.

Oliver jumps off the roof, landing in a crouch on the balcony below, entering the building from there.
He waits in the darkness for a moment and is rewarded with the charging footsteps of Lance. Rather
than engage in a chase, he knocks the brazen detective unconscious with his bow, then makes his
escape.

“Dig, I got away. It’s fine,” Oliver speaks into the communicator only when he’s crouched on a fire
escape in an empty alley several blocks away.

The other man’s been waiting in tense silence for what probably seems like an agonizing several
minutes, and Dig’s relief comes loud and clear over the line as he replies, “Didn’t have to rough them
up too bad, I hope?”

“Just Lance,” he admits. “That was a timely warning, Diggle.”

“Yeah, well you can thank Barry,” the other man answers the unspoken question, then adds, “You’ll
have to find him first, though.”
Oliver frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“He called me asking where you were, and when I told him you might be where the police were headed he hung up. Won’t answer anymore. I think he’s trying to run there, though for who knows what.”

He suppresses the urge to groan, wondering whose idea it was to make his night ridiculously complicated, and climbs the fire escape up to another roof. Oliver starts making his way from there, hoping to intercept a certain wayward scientist on the most likely route from police station to the Winnick Building.

It’s not an absolute guarantee he’ll find the younger man, or that he’s even out here to find. He could have just as easily hung up on Dig in order to hail a cab or otherwise make his way to the foundry—

Except there Barry is, barely keeping his pounding feet under him as he rounds a wide corner down on the pavement about two blocks from Oliver’s current perch, breathing hard with a flushed face and eyes fixed on some goal indiscernible to anyone else. Oliver can’t understand it, nor can he get a handle on how he feels about it. Regardless, he descends into the alleyway beneath him, listens and waits for the other man’s approach.

At the right moment Oliver reaches out for the second time that night to grab a person by the shoulders and pull them to him. He spins Barry to face him, however, in order to cover the man’s mouth and stifle the startled yelp that comes from it.

The forensic scientist is still fighting his hold so Oliver mutters, “It’s me, you can stop struggling.” It has an immediate effect as Barry actually leans forward now, eyes searching him in what little light is being given off by a dim, flickering streetlamp down the block. He waits to remove his hand, not really wanting to watch the nearly joyous smile drop from the man’s face as he demands, “What did you think you were doing?”

When the hand is finally taken away, Barry responds almost instantly. “I found out Detective Lance had one of the CSU’s start trailing Laurel through her normal phone and that they caught her heading for what was probably a meet up, and then Dig told me it might be with you so—”

“I know all that,” he cuts across impatiently. It’s no surprise, really, that he’s apparently decided on being irritable. “I meant why did you think it was a good idea to go running right to it? A whole taskforce of your coworkers were there, Barry, and could have recognized you. It’s bad enough Laurel already has so much of your information. And just what was the plan?”

The younger man is at a loss, except to speak glumly to his shoes, “Dig said you don’t like people helping you.”

“Forget what Dig says for a minute. Listen to what I am saying,” he states. “Out here is not where I need your help. I do not need you running all over the city with no clue what you’re doing. If you’re going to run, do it with direction. Otherwise, it is not helping me—at all. Are we clear?”

It’s hard to tell in the lighting they have, but he thinks Barry’s face is burning in shame. All Oliver can do is clench his fists and fix his gaze somewhere a little up and to the left of the scientist’s ear. “Get a cab home, Barry.”

The other man looks up again with injured shock. “But—”

“I’ve stayed here too long as it is.” The passing minutes are only increasing their chances of being seen or overheard, and that’s the last thing he wants.
Something seems to shutter in Barry’s expression and his face takes on a hard, stubborn set. “Then just go already.” He shoulders past Oliver and back out onto the street without a second glance. Oliver wants to hit something; he settles for the wall. Then he resumes his trek back to the foundry.

Can’t Barry see he’s just being pragmatic? Why does he have to take everything to heart? He feels too much.

When he brings as much up to Dig, in a quiet moment after their latest debate on his mother—prompted by his friend’s admission he’s taken it upon himself to start surveillance on her—the only answer he gets back is, “That feeling’s why he’s working with us in the first place. But you can’t count on it lasting if you’re faulting him for it at every turn, Oliver.”

The last five years he spent learning not to trust in people’s emotions, their feelings. Those could change. But not Barry’s, he decides, not this time. It’s going to take a lot of work and relearning on his part, though, if he wants to make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so later and shorter than I wanted, but it felt like the best place to stop and get this out to you guys. Things are a little turbulent between Barry and Oliver now, but we'll see how that develops. Thanks so much for reading and let me know any thoughts!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barry’s part of the crew that does a sweep of Laurel Lance’s apartment after her abduction is discovered. There’s not much analysis to be done, as Vanch has left a calling card in the form of a demand to meet the Hood, so he wastes no time in getting over to the foundry. Diggle raises an eyebrow at his entrance, like he’s surprised Barry even wanted to come back here, and Oliver is gearing up.

He takes a deep breath and forces his voice to be level, steady. “Hey, did you guys hear about the abduction?”

“Detective Lance just called. I’m meeting him to discuss our next move,” is the answer he gets as he draws up to the man. Oliver shuts the lid on the box where he stores his quiver and bow, then he turns and gives him an almost troubled look. The hood of his suit is down, but he’s already wearing the green greasepaint on his face and Barry’s struck for a moment by how absurd it looks. But he sobers when Oliver starts to say, “Barry, about last night—”

“No. No, it’s ok, really.” It’s a foolish hope that they can just ignore what happened, and so he gives a rueful smile, a shrug of his shoulders. “You were right, I didn’t really know what I was doing. Won’t happen again.”

He thinks that will be it, but Oliver remains, lips pursed for a moment like he’s debating what he wants to say, either a prepared statement or a response, he doesn’t know. “I think I was unclear about why I was…upset with you. My primary concern is your identity. Lance already suspects Vanch has a mole in the police department; we don’t want to give him any reason to think you’ve allied with me.”

So the prepared statement, then. Oliver’s a proud man, the sort not given over to thank yous or apologies very often; he already knows this. This one still makes him smile, even as he shakes his head.

“Guess you shouldn’t keep him waiting, then,” is all he says in reply, which seems to release the discomfort in the vigilante’s stance somewhat as he nods and then steps around him.

Dig waits until the door to the foundry shuts behind Oliver to voice his own opinion on the matter. “You know, you don’t have to let him off if you don’t want. He can take it.”

“He’s trying. For a five-year castaway, I’d say that’s pretty good,” Barry counters, then looks the other man straight in the eye. “And I’ve been there—not a castaway, I mean. Just, somebody who needs somebody else with, well, a lot of patience. And understanding. Not that they excuse you for everything, but just…enough to give you space.”

“You’re talking about what happened after your mother,” Dig ventures, quiet and solemn like he’s trying not to startle him with it. Barry still stiffens, then drops his gaze.

“I guess you guys would’ve had to look me up eventually,” he acknowledges, sees Diggle nod in his periphery.

“We’ve all had our losses, Barry. You hide yours pretty well, I got to say, but that doesn’t really mean it’s left you.” The former army man pauses, eyes darting up to the ceiling as he thinks, then
The recording, containing a conversation between Mrs. Queen and an unknown garbled voice, is disheartening to say the least. The revelation that the shipwreck that doomed Oliver to five years of a torturous existence was no accident makes his chest feel tight and his fists clench.

“She couldn’t have known when it happened, or before,” he insists. “There’s no way. I mean, when Oliver talks about her—she loves her kids, Dig.’

“And what mother wouldn’t?” The other man suggests with a pointed dubiousness. When Barry simply stares, he gives a sigh. “You got to disassociate whatever experiences you’ve had, and look at the facts for a moment.”

He paces a few steps away, then turns back. “Ok. Ok, um, whether or not she knew before the Queen’s Gambit was wrecked, she clearly does now. She had the wreckage salvaged, but didn’t contact the police. Now whoever she was meeting with is pressuring her to have it destroyed,” he lists off. “It sounds like an insurance policy gone wrong, not like she’s plotting something or I don’t know.”

“Alright, but insurance against what? Who’s she got to be so afraid of, and why can’t she go to the authorities about it? That’s what we’ll need to find out,” Dig concludes.

“Has Oliver heard this?” When Dig nods, Barry closes his eyes briefly, then asks, “How’d he take it?”

“Think he’s still processing to be honest. But once all this stuff with Laurel’s over—and it might really be after this—that’s when he’s going to have to make a decision.”

Barry nods, lets his feet carry him over to the computer. “If we knew more about the list itself—like, why create it in the first place? Who else knows about it, and what it was for before Oliver started using it for his mission? What does it have to do with ‘the Undertaking’ they’re talking about? I’d try cross-referencing the names, but there’s just so many probably a bunch of coincidental connections would pop up.” He’s left frowning at the unfortunate reality that, “I guess Mrs. Queen’s the only one who could tell us for certain.” Barry looks back to Dig. “Maybe you should do it, as the Hood I mean.”

The other man shakes his head. “Oliver will want to be in control of that situation, even if it’d be easier on him. Anyway I only put the suit on when he can’t.”

Barry feels the corner of his mouth tug up, can’t help remarking, “You know, I really got to wonder if being stranded on an island turns somebody into a micromanager or if it’s just Oliver.”

Diggle doesn’t laugh, but it’s clear he’s fighting a smile of his own while he walks over to join him at the table, and he realizes they’ve both moved over to the communicator station, waiting for word. “So that’s what you were really thinking.”

He shrugs a single shoulder. “Maybe a little bit.”

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It’s the right thing, to cut the ties between Laurel and the Hood, and he knows he shouldn’t dwell on it. Involving her in the first place was dangerous, to both of them. Of course, she’s not the only
person he’s potentially put in danger through association.

John Diggle is a capable man, a soldier. While circumstance may have caused their meeting due to his mother hiring the bodyguard, early on Oliver decided Dig was the one to join his mission; level-headed, skilled, a fighter.

Barry Allen is…a tad more complicated. He’s capable, skilled certainly, just not in a way Oliver had anticipated needing on his team. Though not a fighter, he has a considerable drive to do what he feels is right. For some reason he feels that’s helping Oliver.

They’re both more involved than Laurel even has been, but if he keeps a careful watch—and his temper—he’s confident it won’t result in something like what’s occurred with Vanch. When he comes down the steps of the foundry to find his two teammates talking amicably over takeout, it gives an extra boost to that confidence.

He called ahead to let them know Vanch had been apprehended, but Barry still gives a little jolt upon hearing him, turns around in his chair. “Hey!”

It’s a smile that breaks out on the scientist’s face, he’s relieved to note, a real one this time. Oliver knows when he’s being let off for something, having provided several disappointments to friends and family since his return to Starling. And he’d been right, Barry was being needlessly reckless. But hadn’t the whole thing started with Oliver’s reckless behavior in regards to Laurel? His own hypocrisy sits bitterly with him now, especially knowing it likely wasn’t lost on either of the other two men.

Barry might have adopted a forgive and forget attitude with him before he left, but it seems that whatever he and Dig have discussed has really accomplished the task of smoothing things over.

He is at once grateful and unsettled; in their team’s interactions Barry tends to gravitate towards Oliver, but it should come as no surprise that John’s strong yet warm presence holds its own sway. It’s just hitting him now that while he may be out on missions, there’s not just going to be one person sitting and waiting here for word, and whatever this new setup is he’ll be absent from it.

Barry seems to take Oliver’s lack of return greeting as a silent demand for explanation, his eyes darting back to the food and trash on the table. “We all skipped dinner before coming here, and then Dig mentioned he gets Big Belly Burger for free, so this just kind of happened. That’s really awesome, by the way,” he says over his shoulder to former army man. “I mean I get free coffee whenever I’m in Central, but still—oh, and one of these is for you.”

He starts rummaging around in the pile of paper and foil. Dig meets Oliver’s eyes and remarks, “Hope you’re hungry, cause Carly packed your usual. Might be cold now, though.”

Barry stops for a moment. “Oh yeah. Maybe we should get a microwave.”

“A microwave?” The words are startled out of him, and they come out a bit harsher than he means them to. He closes his eyes for a beat, then sets about putting his equipment away, hoping that beginning the process of shedding the Hood guise might make the tone he wants to use appear. “Should I put in cabinets as well?” Chances a glance back to see Barry shake his head and lean it towards one shoulder, lips closed but stretching out into something not quite a smile.

“Ok, for the record I never said you should remodel. But a microwave would be way useful.”

“Noted. Dig, any thoughts?”
The other man looks bemused by the exchange so far, but replies, “Sounds good to me.”

“Aaand found it!” Barry says with an enthusiasm most would reserve for locating a hidden treasure, or at least money in an old coat pocket. He pulls a takeout bag from the rest of the pile and holds it out to him, then looks him up and down. “But you probably want to change first. And wash your face. That greasepaint’s got to take a lot of work to get off, doesn’t it?”

“Then I’ll definitely need a microwave,” Oliver deigns to dodge that particular question, glad as he is that Barry’s gone back to basically musing aloud about the idiosyncrasies of the Hood rather than just telling him to go away. “The oven at home will have to suffice.”

But the reminder of home brings with it the recording, and it’s like he’s been doused with cold water, taking his fleeting good mood with it. Oliver grabs his change of clothes without another word and goes to make the full transition from vigilante to billionaire. On the drive back the others can tell something weighs heavily on his mind, though Barry tries to engage him back in conversation a few times before he’s dropped off. The scientist has been holding onto the takeout bag all this time, but scoots it toward Oliver on the seat; he thinks of a puppy, but it’s a friend who’s looking back at him with those wide eyes.

“Goodnight,” he manages, and is left with a smile for that effort. Oliver still doesn’t see what he’s done in the past twenty-four hours that warrants the man smiling at him again.

Dig offers a sympathetic look in the rearview mirror when he stops them by the front door of Queen Mansion; they both know this can’t be avoided. But Oliver is quick to slip through the front door and up to his room, mercifully encountering no one. He doesn’t know if he could keep the charade up right now that is Oliver Queen, either the brother or especially the son.

He eats the burger and fries cold in his room, and doesn’t really sleep.

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Oliver is at the foundry the next afternoon. He took the bike over, and now spends the solitary time training. At first. But he can’t seem to keep from glancing over repeatedly at the recording device Diggle used. He steps off the mat and picks it up, listens to it again. His mother’s voice, confirming that he wasn’t stranded in hell for five years; he was condemned. How could she know this and still see him every day? He remembers on the docks her protests to him taking the trip. Did she know even then?

There’s footsteps on the stairs and he’s surprised to find that Barry is early for once. The younger man starts to smile, but it falters when he spots what Oliver’s still holding in his hand. “Dig played me that last night. Oliver, I’m… I really don’t know what to say. What you must be thinking.”

“How do you cope?” He thinks, this might be the worst way to bring it up, but he needs to hear more than sympathetic platitudes and so clarifies, “Your father.”

Barry’s just a few paces away, but he stops and closes his eyes for a moment, a grimace overtaking his features. “That’s the thing, I really wouldn’t know. My dad’s innocent.” Oliver hasn’t researched deeply the case of Nora Allen’s murder, but everything he’s read has made it clear it was open-and-shut. So he must look skeptical as Barry’s gaze falls somewhere closer to Oliver’s shoulder than his face and he rubs at the back of his neck. “I can explain. It might sound crazy, but—actually it’s not even important to this—”

“No.” Barry looks bewildered by the strong, single-worded response. Oliver draws in a breath through his nose before continuing, “I may be the one in the hood out on the streets, but I’ve made
this your mission, and Dig’s, as much as it is mine. If it’s important to you, it’s important to the team.”

Barry’s not meeting his eyes again, but it’s a smile that’s now playing at his lips and Oliver thinks, yeah, he’s finally found those words he was looking for since two nights ago. “Thanks,” the other man replies, soft with a flicker of his gaze to Oliver’s face and away. “I really wish I could be more help about your mother, though. But, you know, we still don’t have all the information.” The scientist takes two steps and reaches out, taking the hand clenched around the bugging device, turns it over palm-up. “Listening to this isn’t going to give you any more.” Barry plucks the little thing out of his grasp with his free hand and sets it aside. “And it’s definitely not that good for you either.”

“You’re pretty confident you know what is and isn’t good for me,” he notes wryly. Barry is at times a contradictory mix of fumbling and self-assuredness, and when it comes to Oliver he seems to be increasingly the latter. Perhaps he thinks after this and their meeting in the warehouse that he’s weathered the storm. Perhaps Oliver is letting him. Too easy.

But then the third member of their team is letting himself in the foundry. They both have dropped their hands back down to their sides by the time Diggle gets down the stairs. “So, are we moving on with your list tonight?” There’s a lift to the former soldier’s tone at the end, an alternative suggestion clear in his mind.

And Oliver answers, “We need to find out more about the Undertaking. I’m going to have to talk with my mother.”

Dig looks solemn, Barry troubled, and Oliver is sure he appears outwardly grim, but they are all aware it’s the only course of action left. He suits up and departs, reminding himself of the mission and the words we still don’t have all the information at the fore of his thoughts. Whether he likes the truth or not, he needs to find out. Until then, he can hold onto a little bit of hope.

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There’s no food, no talking in the foundry tonight. Barry feels sick with the thought of what might be happening at Queen Consolidated, half-hoping Moira Queen is an innocent victim, half-hoping she’s deserving of the Hood’s method of ‘talking’. He can’t decide what would be better for Oliver’s sake, and he wishes he were as good at it as Oliver says.

He occupies his time counting the number of arrows there are prepped for use. It seems low, and he recalls that the vigilante returned last night with an empty quiver. Did he run out? What happens then? What if runs out at Queen Consolidated where there’s armed guards and a police station not a five minute drive out and—

But the door at the top of the stairs opens and Barry looks up so, so relieved—except it’s not Oliver at all standing there, it’s a woman about his age. Blonde with glasses and a nice purple coat that’s not as bloodstained as her hands.

“Felicity?” Diggle asks sharply.

“Please help,” the so-named Felicity sounds faint, and then she says something that makes him think the floor’s about to drop out from under them. “He’s really heavy.”

Barry’s racing outside with Dig to a car with the side door open. It looks like she tried moving Oliver as his feet and calves are sticking out in the open air, but it takes Diggle to lean in and haul the man up and out. There’s a bullet wound that’s still bleeding badly, and Barry clamps a hand over it as they make their way back inside. Diggle guides them over to a metal table that he always thought
kind of looked like it could be used for medical purposes. He never actually wanted to see it be used for medical purposes. And definitely not a surgery.

“This is probably the furthest thing from a hospital,” he has to say.

“Well, it’d be a bit awkward trying to explain a gunshot wound to them,” Diggle replies. He’s gotten out some blue latex gloves, throws a pair each to him and the woman.

“How did he even get shot?” It’s probably dumb to ask. Of course people have fired on the vigilante before. They’ve just never hit him.

“Oh don’t look at me,” Felicity pipes up. “He was already like this when I got in my car. Seriously, though, do any of us actually know what we’re doing?”

“Just a little,” Dig answers, a sea of calm amongst his and Felicity’s panicked hovering as he works the green jacket off of the unconscious Oliver to give them clear access. But then he looks up at Barry. “You probably know most.”

Oh God.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the (sort of) cliffy, but I wanted to devote the proper time into Felicity's introduction to this version of Team Arrow. That'll be coming up next, so thanks for reading and let me know what you thought!
Ok, I know this was a longer wait than most of you were hoping for, but here is the next part. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barry is gaping in some mute horror, eyes first pleading with Diggle, then locking onto that equally gaping wound in Oliver’s shoulder—just a few inches lower and—I- I usually only work on dead people.”

Felicity’s eyes are wide behind her glasses as the unfamiliar woman takes a step back from him. “Wow, that’s a really terrifying introduction.”

Him, terrifying? “Wha—no, no, I’m a CSI, comes with the job!” He hastens to correct, even as Diggle is maneuvering him to the head of the table with a hand on his elbow.

“Barry, I need you focused.”

“Right.” He gulps. Takes a deep breath. Grabs up the forceps. “Ok.” The next few minutes are tense and hurried. Removing the bullet while Dig and Felicity work to stop the bleeding, then stitching up the wound. Oliver’s face is pale, practically bloodless, and he’s lost so much, but he’s breathing. Barry sags against the table as he literally feels his adrenaline draining, his forehead dropping to rest on the cool surface of the table’s edge.

Dig squeezes one of his shoulders, at once a congratulations and a check on his mental state. He does the latter verbally for the other conscious occupant in the room, saying, “You’re taking this pretty well.”

Barry merely turns so his cheek is now pillowed on the table, feels a tingle in the very roots of the hair on top of his head as the movement causes him to brush something—Oliver’s arm, his brain helpfully supplies—in order to get a look at the woman, who is placing down the Hood’s bow under his and Diggle’s stares. He feels his lips quirk up in a smile just imagining how Oliver might react to that.

“Oh, well, I’d figured Oliver was up to something from all his visits. Not this, I mean I never thought he was actually doing this, but—he’s a really bad liar. Laptop full of bullet holes? Not very subtle.”

Barry finally lifts his head in order to raise an eyebrow at Dig, who grimaces. But the older man then states, calm yet earnest, “Yeah, well that laptop belonged to a mercenary—goes by Deadshot.” The emphasis on that name he thinks is instinctual, but he’s unsure why as the man doesn’t elaborate on that, instead continuing, “The information you pulled off it helped Oliver figure out his next targets. You saved a whole lot of people, Felicity.”

She looks stunned in an awed kind of way, so he offers, “Pretty cool. I got to analyze a sample of Vertigo so he could go after the Count. The things we do to help, they matter.”

Her head tilts slightly, ponytail swinging with the movement, and she replies, “Well, if I was ever
looking for job validation, I’ve found the person for it.” She steps toward him and states, “Felicity Smoak, IT girl for Queen Consolidated.”

Well that solves all his wondering about where Oliver and Diggle must have met her. He straightens up properly, belatedly strips off the gloves, meets her halfway and holds out his hand for her to shake. “Barry Allen, forensics guy for the SCPD.”

She smiling, but seems bemused. “Wait, like Police Department PD? You work for the police and the Hood. Seems like a conflict of very different interests.”

He raises his free hand to rub at the back of his neck. “Oh, well, I don’t really think so. I mean, it’s all about helping people right?”

“But the Hood’s also been not-so-helpful to some people,” she points out, then looks between him and Diggle. “Actually, I don’t really understand how either of you are ok with this. I mean, you just seem like people who would have a problem with some of the stuff he’s done.”

Barry is unsure at first, of what to say. But it’s Diggle who draws in a breath and responds. “When I served in Afghanistan, I was charged with protecting a warlord. A drug and child trafficker under U.S. protection,” he scoffs. “And a fight broke out, insurgents attacking our guy, so we fired back. I killed one of them, but when I checked him afterward...he was a teenager, just some kid, who I killed for a guy like that. Spent a lot of time after that wondering if I was still a good man. Doing this, helping Oliver...” The barest of smiles appears on the man’s face. “I feel like a good man again.”

Felicity’s not the only one impacted by such a story. Barry stares at the former soldier with wide eyes, taking all that in. Dig is such a force, exuding a strength that’s tempered by his calm, and he would have never imagined. Again, he thinks of what else John Diggle might have lost in his past that’s brought him here.

But then Oliver is seizing on the table. Barry practically flies back over, the fear, the panic rising back up all the greater, vicious in its demand not to be forgotten. “Irregular heartbeat. Oh god, he might be going into arrest!”

“What do we do?” Felicity, just as frantic.

Dig nudges him out of the way as he wheels something over, takes up the paddles one in each hand — since when did they have a defibrillator? — and waits for them to charge.

“You’ve used those before, right?” Barry asks hopefully.

“Nope.” Then the man goes to touch them down.

“You didn’t say clear!” Is Felicity’s anxious cry, and she latches onto Barry’s arm for a moment while they both cringe. But the shock doesn’t come and nothing about Oliver’s condition changes.

“They’re not working,” Diggle practically growls in frustration.

Barry and Felicity both move, him forward and her to the side. “Then forget it!” He starts compressions, tries not to think about how long Oliver’s hearts been stopped, blood not getting where it needs to go, but—

“Barry, Barry, wait, it was a wire, let him try again,” he thinks it’s Felicity who’s yanking at his shoulders, shouting “Clear!” for Diggle while he’s shocking Oliver again, and then the unconscious man goes still and the pounding in his ears finally stops.
“How did you—” Both he and Diggle start to ask at the same time, then stop.

Felicity shrugs. “I’ve been working with computers ever since I was seven. Wires are wires. But, uh,” she pats Barry’s shoulder, lets go, “that was good too.”

He shakes his head ruefully. “The less attention called to my panic-driven instincts, the better.” The second wave of adrenaline he’s been hit with is wearing down again, and he rubs at his tired, straining eyes. “If he’s never on this table again, it’ll be—”

“Too soon?” She guesses, and he reopens them to share a smile before his gaze is drawn back to Oliver. The man might just be out of the woods if he’s gotten through all this, though Barry won’t envy him the nasty scar he’s going to have from his attempt at basement surgery. It won’t be alone, though, as he starts to take in the sheer number of scars, some jagged and dark while others are the faintest of lines on his muscled torso. He thinks about the story each one of them might tell, remembers the report he got a peek at from Oliver’s polygraph test—he was tortured—and he thinks being at Barry’s tender mercies might be the least of Oliver’s problems so far. All he can do is stare at them really, and the absurd thought of McKenna Hall, eat your heart out passes through his overworked brain. That is, if the detective likes scars.

Or ink, he realizes belatedly, eyes catching the rather distinct design taking up a large portion of the left side of Oliver’s chest. It’s detailed and incredibly specific and kind of familiar, like he’s seen it in police reports and—

When Barry lets out a laugh, he doesn’t need to see Felicity and Dig’s somewhat concerned, disturbed expressions to know he’s probably gone a bit hysterical. “No way,” he gets out. “No, no way. That’s a,” he touches the barest tip of a finger down on the design, “that’s a Bratva tattoo.” And he’s probably grinning like a bit of a loon as he hangs his head with a chuckle. “He really is mafia.”

Now Dig, at least, is actually smiling when he looks back at the other two. “I’d almost forgotten about that,” the older man admits with the barest of laughs that’s more seen in the shaking of his shoulders than heard. Then he looks to an increasingly nervous Felicity and says with a placating tone, “He doesn’t actually do work for them.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It really is just about helping people,” Barry adds. “For all of us, even if Oliver talks about his list all the time.” Barry’s really starting to hate that list, actually, because even if it’s what got Oliver started in the first place it seems like whoever started the list is determined to stop him whether with arrows or a gun. “I don’t really see much of a conflict, because the police and the vigilante, they’re both trying to make the city better. All I’m doing is helping both. The only problem is sometimes with—evidence!”

“What?” Felicity seems confused by his sudden exclamation. Barry’s clapped a hand over his mouth in horror, but Diggle snaps to attention, throwing Barry his coat and grabbing up his keys.

Barry starts answering her as best he can even as his reply becomes an anxiety jumble of epic proportions, “He got shot, must’ve left blood, they’ll collect it. Probably already have! I gotta get to the station, find out who’s testing it—maybe I can switch it out or- or spill a coffee. That’ll be good, spill a coffee, they’ll ban it in the labs and everyone will hate me and I won’t even care because—”

“Wait, wait!” She calls out for the second time. Dig’s been ushering Barry—who has one arm through the wrong sleeve—up the steps, but both of them freeze and look at her. “Give me one—no, five, wow these systems are old—five minutes on one of these, and it won’t be a problem.” She sits in front of one of the computers and brings it out of sleep mode, immediately typing away. Barry and
Dig exchange a look before heading back down and coming to stand behind her.

“What are you doing?” Diggle asks.

“Getting into the police crime lab and ordering any samples of his blood destroyed. Glitch in the system, happens all the time,” she glances up at them with a sweet little smile and mischievous eyes and he’s kind of in awe. Also a little bit jittery and unsure of what to do with himself. It’s not been lost on him that Felicity’s been right there with him freaking out through most of this, but he thinks it probably looks even worse coming from him, who’s ideally supposed to be used to this.

So he draws in a breath, fixes his coat, and says, “Well, if you give me your keys I can see what I can do about cleaning your car. Your coat, too, but you might still want to have that dry-cleaned.”

“Yes, thank you. I really didn’t know how I was going to get those stains out—the blood stains, I mean, not any other kind of stains,” she corrects, head jerking around sharply to stare at him with wide eyes.


“Oh, I wasn’t implying that you thought that, I just wanted to make sure that that wasn’t what you thought I was thinking or saying or—you know what? I’m just going to update these systems instead. Right now.” She whips back around to face the computers.

Barry looks helplessly at the back of her head, then to Dig. The other man, who looks like he’s forcing back a grin, takes pity and prompts, “Felicity, keys.”

“Oh! Um, in my coat, right pocket,” she replies, sneaking the briefest of glances at him before adjusting her glasses and turning away again.

“Thanks,” Barry replies, both to her and Dig, really. He collects some of the supplies Oliver’s stocked the foundry with for these sorts of purposes. Barry frowns at one of the labels, there’s a cheaper cleaner that’s just as efficient he’s sure, but then again if you can afford to have your own defibrillator. Her coat has been dumped on an empty space on one of the tables, an effective workspace so he starts there first. They’re all working and waiting in companionable silence now. But then it’s time to take her keys, take one last look at Oliver’s prone form before heading up the steps.

The lighting’s not ideal, that in between gray before the sun’s really out, but Barry finds the overhead light and gets to work on the backseat. He’s just stripping off the gloves he put on for the job when he hears the clack of her heels approaching behind him. “Hey, so you’re going to want to avoid putting anything back here for a day or so, and if the smell kind of bothers you, car air fresheners or windows down. You do not want to use AC.” Barry looks over to see her smiling at him, coat draped over one arm, and he hands her back her keys.

“Thanks, Barry. He’s awake, by the way.” He feels an instant relief that brings a smile to his face and makes to step around her. But Felicity touches a hand to his arm, and says, “It was nice meeting you, even with everything not-so-nice that had to happen for it.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Will I see you around?”

She seems to get the meaning behind that question and replies, “I think so. Goodnight.”

“You too.” He manages to wait long enough to watch her get in her car and pull away from the back of the under-development club. Then he’s spinning back around and heading for the door—only to nearly barrel right into Oliver himself. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry!” Barry jumps back, reaches a
hand out and hovers it uselessly over the other man’s wound, now covered up by a sweater as well as the bandages, as if that will somehow alleviate any further injury he’s done to him.

“It’s fine,” Oliver says through gritted teeth. He doesn’t look fine; in the morning light he looks groggy and in pain and furious at something and not like he should be heading back to his bike.

“Um, Oliver, maybe you should let Dig—”

“I can get home on my own, Barry. I’m not any more exhausted than any of you are. Diggle will give you a ride.” The older man swings his leg over the bike, looks at him before starting the engine and gives a nod. “Thank you. Get some sleep.”

And then he’s gunning the engine and zooming away. Barry’s stuck watching again until a voice behind him says, “It was his mother.”

“What?” Barry turns back to Dig, doesn’t quite get what the man means for a second. Then his eyes go wide and his head whips back to stare after the path Oliver’s just taken.

“He let his guard down. He still is.” There’s a sigh and he knows Diggle is shaking his head. “Not much we can do about it now. Let’s get you home.”

He nods, lets the other man lead him to the car, but can’t help wondering the whole drive to his apartment just how much of a home Oliver is returning to.

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Barry sleeps through his phone alarm three times, and ends up even more incredibly late to work than usual. As a result, he’s forced to stay later to catch up on work and to receive the second lecture that’s being given to the entire lab staff that day about the handling of evidence. He doesn’t ask who was on-shift last night, doesn’t want to know who’s probably in hot water now due to Felicity’s actions. It’s later evenings at the crime lab for the next few days, as he doesn’t want to draw suspicion now of all times to how early he tends to leave.

One night, Felicity is not in her now customary seat in front of the computers in the foundry when he finally gets there, and neither is Oliver to be found. Dig, though, looks troubled.

“Everything ok?” He asks.

“Felicity’s quit.”

“What?” He can’t help exclaiming.

“She doesn’t completely agree with the Hood’s methods,” Dig informs him with a meaningful look. Barry shifts his weight from one foot to the other, looks down at the floor.

“Oh.”

“You’ve been pretty quiet on the subject yourself.” He can practically hear the question in that.

Barry shoves his hands in his pockets and gives a shrug. “I guess, um, there haven’t really been those sorts of…incidents, since I’ve joined up. I mean, there’s been injuries, yeah, but not- not that.”

Diggle nods, lips pursed together. “So what you’re saying is you haven’t thought about it too much.” He wants to argue, wants to say that he did consider it, back when he was deciding just what he thought about the hooded Vigilante. But it’s true that once his involvement was added into the mix
he started to emphasize the death—the killing—less. “Barry, I’m going to tell you, it’s something you should think about, and make a choice about, now. You’re not obligated to help just cause you know about all this. But Oliver needs a team he can depend on. I want you to be sure you’re a part of that team.”

He takes in a deep breath, goes and drops into the computer chair. “He’s not—he shouldn’t be above the law,” Barry says at last. “But it’s a different law he’s operating under, isn’t it? Survival, kill or be killed, the things that kept him alive on that island, that’s what he takes out onto the streets with him every time he puts on that hood. I mean, we can judge him all we want from where we are, but he’s not here, is he?”

“But what he does is affecting people here,” Dig points out, reasonable even in the face of Barry’s conflict. The conflict that’s apparently driven Felicity away, just as it’s driven Detective Lance to hunt the Vigilante down. But Felicity has helped him, Lance has worked with him. Neither of them are conveniently forgetting what Oliver’s done for a few spare moments, they are seeing—if only the briefest glimmer—something else in the Hood, something other than a murderer. Something Barry himself has seen.

So he smiles and says. “It’s going to keep affecting people. Oliver won’t stop being the Hood just because me or anyone else quits. But he might change. He can change, he is. Because of you, because of the people of this city turning to him for more than some list, maybe even because of me. Only way I can know that is if I’m still here to depend on, right?”

And Diggle smiles, nods. “Right.”

It’s a while after that when Oliver returns, goes to his book, and crosses off a name. “Kurt Williams agreed to give back the money he stole,” the man announces. “Then I think he went to go check on his son. Not that it matters much.” The last part is muttered with a brief glance to the computers, a pained expression overtaking his features briefly.

“Sure it does,” Barry asserts, and Oliver meets his eyes.

There’s a slight upward quirk at the corner of his mouth before Oliver replies, “Good.”

The next morning, though, Barry can’t seem to shake the disappointment, the regret the older man had exhibited when looking at Felicity’s computers. Clearly Oliver had depended on Felicity, had been planning to make her part of the team, someone he valued and trusted. And Barry thinks Felicity might still want that, too. Or at least, he wants to give her the opportunity that Dig afforded him last night to come to a conclusion based on everything he knows and understands about Oliver, and not some split-second decision based on an argument.

So he gets out his phone as he enters his cramped little lab and sends a text, vague enough but getting to the point.

*Hey, heard what happened. Want to talk?*

He’s not expecting anything immediate, but it shouldn’t really surprise him given what he knows that she’s quick to get his message and reply.

*Let’s get lunch.*

*So we can talk.*

*If you have a lunch break.*
Of course you do, ignore that last one.

Actually just ignore all of this. Except the lunch part.

And he can’t help grinning at the whole thing as he’s finally able to catch up with the bombardment of messages.

Sure. You pick the time and place.

Chapter End Notes

Little of Oliver in this one, but I wanted to firmly establish Barry’s relationships with Diggle and Felicity and this altered version of Team Arrow. More of him in the next one, I promise. Thanks for reading and let me know what you thought!
Chapter 9

Felicity sighs, checks her watch again, and looks up just in time to see the door of the little café swing open and Barry to come rushing in, eyes searching around the room. It’s a bit too loud to call out, so she raises her arm straight up in the air, like an overeager student she realizes, but feels less bad about it when he smiles brightly at her across the room, raises his own arm. For a second, before he sheepishly glances about the small space and lowers it, making his way to her.

“Sorry I’m late,” he apologizes while dropping into the seat across.

“It’s fine. I probably should have picked somewhere more in-between where we work, but I was planning on coming here anyway and they have really good salads. Extra croutons.” Then she blanches, tries to cover with, “not that that’s the only reason I would get a salad—”

“Please, why does anyone just get salads?” He scoffs. Then with a smile adds, “Totally going to have to try one now.”

She has to smile in return at that. Barry is ridiculously charming, even when awkward. And it’s never typical male dork awkward, where he can’t seem to get two words out because she’s a girl, but a brand of weirdness similar to her own. For her, it probably adds all the more to his charm, though he’s certainly no suave Casanova or Oliver Queen.

And that’s another reason, really, why she isn’t up for more than a salad for lunch. Felicity hasn’t felt very hungry since her argument with Oliver and leaving the team.

When they’ve gotten their food and resettled, she can’t help saying this member of said team, “Barry, if this is about getting me to rejoin—”

“I just want to know what happened, Felicity. What you’re thinking.” His eyes are earnest and trusting, his voice pitched quieter than usual, but not a whisper so that it gets lost in amongst everyone else’s chatter

“I’m thinking I’m not so sure I want to help a dangerous vigilante. I know he’s done some good things, Barry, but he’s also done bad things.” He doesn’t try to protest it and his gaze drops to the table. It weighs on him, too, then. “And I don’t think that even bad people deserve that, not when they’re people with friends and family too. It’s hard for me to classify the Hood as different from them when he shows the same lack of restraint.”

“He’s learning restraint,” Barry insists. “And I know that probably shouldn’t be good enough, but he is learning. He doesn’t have to be like them. Kurt Williams is alive, Felicity, and the thing is—he did that for you.”

Her eyes are wide behind her glasses as she asks, “Why me?”
“Because he wants you on the team, and that means he respects your opinion, what’s important to you,” Barry tells her with an assuredness she can’t help but be affected by. Then he looks down again, pushes a tomato around with his fork. “Thing is, I’m not even supposed to be on this team. I found out Oliver was…doing what he’s doing by accident. So I guess I’m- I’m just kind of there. But Felicity,” he spears the tomato, looks up and points it at her, “he picked you from the start. So you have a lot more say in just how to classify the Hood than you think.” He gives her a cheeky grin, then pops the fruit in his mouth.

Felicity wishes she has that same confidence in her abilities as Barry seems to have. Oh, she knows what she’s capable of from behind a computer screen, to be sure, but when it comes to people, Oliver in particular. The man was something of an enigma the times he visited her in her office, something fun to think about and tease at. The reality that he’s the Hood, such a dark secret at the center of it all, has made her more leery and nervous of him.

Unlike Barry, who always has something to say to the far surlier vigilante, even if it’s a remark at his expense. The way Oliver tends to react reminds her more of the man who did make those visits to her at work. And if what Barry’s saying is true, perhaps it wasn’t just a mask hiding Oliver’s real identity. Maybe it truly is just a part of him that he shows to a select few. Teammates. Friends.

So Felicity allows herself a smile. “I guess that makes me lucky, huh?” Barry nods, but looks surprised when she leans a bit forward, places a hand over his free one resting on the table. “And accident or no…Oliver’s lucky, too.”

His fingers twitch nervously under her palm. “I don’t know about that.”

“No really. You’ve done more to convince me to stick it out than he has so far, and it’s his stupid list.” She hates that list. Walter found that list and look where it’s gotten him—she still doesn’t know.

Barry is shaking his head, “I’m not really in it just for the list. Oliver doesn’t always stick to it.”

“Well, that I wouldn’t mind seeing,” she comments.

“You will,” he nods, so sure. His fingers twitch again, and then Barry gives a cough. “Um, Felicity, is it cool if I, uh, my hand? I mean, I can just leave it there—”

“Oh! Oh no, sorry,” she says, snatching hers back, “that was supposed to be a reassuring, friend type, touch your hand. Not a way to sneakily hold your hand. It wasn’t really that sneaky, and we weren’t actually holding hands. Not that I wouldn’t mind, you have nice hands—and I’m gonna stop right there.”

Barry’s starting to get red in the face, which looks nowhere near as bad on him as it does on her. “Right,” he manages, gives a bit of a laugh. Then they both focus very intently on finishing their lunches on this not-date he’s invited her on.

It’s a good thing she insisted on paying for her own food.

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Oliver stands with Dig, waiting in Felicity’s office. It seems the blonde tech expert has stepped out for lunch, but a few more minutes waiting is actually better than trying to approach her at her desk, he tells himself. Already being here will catch her off guard and she’ll have no ready excuse to step out again so soon. Which will give Oliver the opportunity to do something he seems to be doing more often recently: appeal to someone for forgiveness.

In the interests of his mission, Felicity Smoak is a must to have on his side. Her skills in hacking and
getting the information he needs from online sources is unmatched. At this point, with everything she already knows, he’s loathe to not have something of a watch on her.

And truthfully, she fits with their little team. Something about her rambling and lack of social awareness had gotten his and Dig’s attention from the start. Her defiance of him in regards to Kurt Williams, while frustrating, has also allowed him to see a stubborn will, more to her than her bright clothes and quirks.

And he’d be blind not to notice her practically instant rapport with Barry. Oliver had wondered before how he might introduce the two when deciding if Felicity should be brought fully onto the team, yet he needn’t have bothered it seems as they ended up becoming great friends over his unconscious body. It’s not surprising; they’re both academically inclined, incredibly smart, akin in many ways in their social fumbling, yet still undoubtedly warm people. For Barry alone, Felicity’s continued inclusion in their group would probably be a boon. She’s likely a better conversation partner for the younger man than he or Dig.

Two voices approaching from down the hall indicate that Barry feels so to. The two men in the office exchange a look, mutually intrigued.

“…MIT, though, that is seriously awesome. And, I mean, Starling, Las Vegas? You heading for a whirlwind tour of the states?

“Oh, trust me, Vegas isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Well, not to knock it, but about the only cool thing we got in Central is a STAR labs, so consider me easily impressed.”

“I would call that selectively impressed, actually, and—oh!” Felicity has just come through the open door and draws up short upon spotting the two of them.

“Oof!” Barry crashes right into her back, though the two stagger and manage to catch themselves and each other. “Oh, hey guys!” If the scientist is displeased in any way about being interrupted at the end of what looks like a lunch date, he definitely has a funny way of showing it. His smile, if anything, has gotten wider at the sight of Oliver and Diggle, and he looks encouragingly to Felicity.

Who looks at Oliver for a moment before turning and making the rest of the journey to her desk. He takes in a breath, mutters a quiet, “Hey,” to Barry, then steps forward. “Felicity, I know that last night we had a disagreement, but I thought you should know—”

“If it’s about Kurt Williams, Barry already told me,” she states, then peers at him over the rim of her glasses. “But…thank you.”

Oliver has to work to keep his expression from giving much away. That she seems to be aware just how much consideration her own feelings were given in regards to his dealings with Williams admittedly throws him, and he supposes he has a certain forensics expert to thank for that.

When that forensics expert kicks his foot, however, the look he gives him is considerably sharper. Barry merely nods pointedly to one of the screens Felicity’s recently turned back on. It’s broadcasting a news report on an art thief who uses hostages to steal. He can’t help frowning in disgust at the report, or noticing the way the woman’s eyes are glued to the screen.

He shares a different look with Barry this time, this time of understanding. When the younger man tilts his head once more in Felicity’s direction, he acts. Oliver brings himself a step closer to the desk and begins, “You know, Felicity, while people like Williams hold a special significance to my
mission, that’s not necessarily everything I do.”

She turns back to him, arches a single eyebrow in interest. “Oh?"

“You helped us stop the Royal Flush Gang,” Diggle points out, catching on just as quickly as usual, “and they weren’t anywhere on the list.”

“Right,” Oliver acknowledges. “See, when I can, I go after normal criminals like this Dodger. And I —we,” he amends, with a glance back at both Barry and Dig, “could really use your help to stop him. Will you?”

She considers for a long moment. “You know, I wondered if you might show up, try to convince me not to reveal your secret. But this…” her eyes drift briefly to just over his left shoulder, where he knows Barry has to be standing, and it occurs to Oliver that they might have been doing more than just making small talk. “Alright,” she finally says, looking to him once more with the barest of smiles. “I’ve heard of this guy, but it won’t hurt to look into it a little deeper. I’ll let you know what I find.” And like that her fingers are flying over the keyboard.

Oliver doesn’t mind letting a little of the gratefulness show in his expression as he says, “Thank you.” Backs up when she waves a hand, clearly in work mode.

He turns, catches Dig’s eye. The man gives a nod, a silent affirmation that he’s done things right. Then he looks to Barry. “Need a lift?”

“Uh, sure, that’d be great. See you, Felicity.” The scientist then continues out into the hall with him and Diggle, but almost jumps out of his skin when Oliver claps a hand down on his shoulder.

“Barry, you’re a genius.” He hadn’t had much of a plan besides telling her about Kurt Williams, but now it seems not only have some of Felicity’s worries been put to rest, but she’s also committed to helping him with something other than finding Walter. It’s not a commitment to the list or his mission, but it’s more than he might have gotten.

The younger man relaxes, though his smile is more bewildered than anything. “Thanks.” He seems so blindsided by the compliment, Oliver can’t help squeezing just a little tighter, leaving his hand there a little longer than he would otherwise.

On Barry’s other side, Dig asks, “You wouldn’t have been meeting with Felicity just to see what might make her re-interested, would you?”

“Well I figured it’d be awful just letting her leave the team without a fight. I mean, you guys did too. And the Dodger, he’s a real piece of work. So everybody wins,” Barry says happily as they enter the elevator and the doors shut. “Except the Dodger, of course. You’re going to win,” Barry looks to Oliver, then says, “What you said in there was good, but I might have maybe promised her you’d buy her some kind of wine she says you owe her?”

He can’t quite hold back a laugh at that reminder. “I’ll buy you both a bottle of wine,” he pledges. What’s a few thousand dollars for a team like this?

Barry shakes his head. “You’d be wasting your billions on me, never actually had wine. Joe’s more of a beer guy.”

“You’re getting what you’re getting. Just be glad I don’t card you,” he shoots back. Whatever Barry’s about to say gets cut off by the ding the elevator makes as it opens. Whatever it was would have probably been interesting judging by the indignant expression on his face.
Dig’s wearing a rather interesting expression himself as they cross the lobby of Queen Consolidated in silence, but when Oliver raises a single brow the man shrugs and seemingly gives it up.

And it’s Diggle who actually ends up treating them all the next day at Big Belly Burger. Felicity seems surprised by the venue, but Oliver wants to keep things a little more low-key for the moment as he’s working to win back her full cooperation.

Carly makes her way over to their table not five minutes after Barry’s just dropped into the available spot next to him, though the waitress still apologizes for the wait. “Got some rowdy customers.”

“You want me to deal with them?” Dig asks almost immediately, and he has to bite down a grin at his friend’s obviousness, especially once she gives him a no thanks and the former army man replies with, “I’ll be here if you need me.”

Felicity almost immediately pounces once Carly’s moved away. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“No,” says Diggle, about the same time that Barry answers with, “Sort of.” Dig gives the other man a look before trying to explain to Felicity, “She’s my sister-in-law.”

“Sort of,” Oliver finds himself interjecting, and his echoing of Barry’s words is deliberately indicative of whose side he’s taking. “Carly was married to Dig’s brother. And he passed away.”

“But Dig totally wants to ask her out,” Barry sums up.

“Oh, you should, she’s way into you,” Felicity states with an affirming nod.

When Dig looks to Oliver, he simply shrugs a shoulder, finding the debate cleanly settled. But his friend has other ideas, it seems, for his says, “Well how about I’ll do that five minutes after Oliver asks out McKenna.”

“McKenna Hall?” Oliver looks to Barry in surprise when the other man asks it, but it hits him that of course he knows her; they’re colleagues of a sort.

Felicity looks increasingly excited by this exploration of his and Dig’s private lives, much to his chagrin since he helped start it. “The detective on the Dodger case? You’ve got a thing for her?”

“Yes,” Dig is happy to answer for him.

“I don’t see you asking Carly out,” he counters in a light sort of tone, trying his best to divert the conversation back in that direction.

“What, are they mutually exclusive?” Barry questions him with a laugh. But they’re all momentarily stunned when Diggle rises from the table, gives Oliver a look, and then starts heading over to Carly. “Ok, guess they are.”

“Yes,” Felicity cheers quietly, with two fists raised in the air. “Now we just have to find someone to dare you to ask out, Barry.”

The scientist goes still for a moment, and then is a fidgeting, blushing mess that won’t meet her gaze. “Oh, no, that’s ok. I actually—”

“Think he’s got that covered,” Oliver says, for the poor man’s benefit if nothing else. Barry looks over at him, comically stunned, and he just manages to avoid rolling his eyes. Honestly, for Felicity to have been astute enough to notice what was going on between Carly and Dig and yet completely miss out on the clearly developing crush Barry’s got for her, it must take a special skill. The man
took her out to lunch after only a few days of knowing her, for crying out loud.

Yet he finds himself, instead of pushing like he’s just done with Dig, turning back to their initial topic. “This Dodger, he targets a specific kind of jewel. We find out what kind, that’ll bring us closer to tracking him down.”

“I’ve been trying to get a look at his file, past thefts and the like, you know,” Barry says, “but most of his info’s being held by Interpol. I mean, the police here are ‘cooperating’, but really that’s just fancy code for the station’s on a need-to-know basis, even more than usual. It might take me another day or so before I can sneak a peak.”

“I have an idea,” Felicity offers. “Oliver’s crush with the badge, is she on that need-to-know?” When Barry nods, she looks back to him and continues, “Well, I could give you some tech, you could distract her with a little flirty-flirt and place it onto her phone, and it would transmit everything to us. Boom, we learn everything she knows.”

He considers for a moment. “Not how I usually do things.”

Felicity looks curious if a little wary. “How do you usually do them?”

“I find the person, then put the fear of God into them until they talk,” he answers plainly.

“Ohh yeah, that about sums it up,” Barry adds knowingly.

Oliver grimaces, finds himself reaching out for the second time in as many days to pat the other man on the shoulder. “You’re fine.”

“Oh-huh.”

“Wait, what?” Felicity asks, looking between them.

He ignores that in favor of telling her, “We can do things your way.”

“No, but what happened?”

Diggle chooses that fortuitous moment to return to the table, and the smile he wears speaks well for the man. “You’re up next,” his friend tells him, then drops the smile for a moment. “Everything ok?”

He’s gesturing at Barry and Oliver realizes belatedly he’s left his hand there again. “Yeah, all good.”

“Oliver’s asking Detective Hall out to get information,” Barry helpfully fills the other man in. Then he hastens to add with a look back to him, “For real, too. I mean, if you want to ask her out for real. It’s going to go well either way,” he states, seemingly trying to reassure Oliver now. “She likes you—and I have a totally legitimate reason for knowing that.”

Barry’s now avoiding his eyes as much as he was Felicity’s earlier. The blonde woman herself looks about a second away from openly laughing at him, and Dig looks similarly amused. Yet Carly proves to have similar expert timing as she approaches their table with their food, and Oliver’s personally glad to shelve all talk of the Dodger or relationships for now.

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Barry catches a ride from Oliver and Diggle over to the precinct. Technically it’s his day off, but there’s probably some form or other he can fill out to cover for the real reason he’s here. Maybe try another go at looking through the files for Dodger’s information. First though he passes by the open
door of the squad room; sure enough, Detective Hall is one of the few inside, and the only other
remaining officers are deeply engrossed in their own case files. So he sends a quick, Coast is clear,
to Oliver’s phone, unsure if he’s just played spy or wingman. In either respect, he makes himself
scarce long before the other man enters the building himself to approach McKenna Hall.

Oliver gets a date and Felicity gets her bug, which almost immediately starts benefiting their team.
Barry and Felicity are keeping vigil in the foundry that night—Dig being out with Carly—when
Oliver calls during what is supposed to be the middle of his date.

“McKenna’s been paged by work. Could you turn on the micro-transmitter?” It takes only a few
moments before they’ve gotten a location for him and Oliver goes to join the police’s hunt for the
Dodger.

“I wonder if Dig’s night is going any better,” Barry muses. He’s pulled a chair over next to Felicity
and her computers, borrowing one for the time being to continue looking through police files.

“Well, Oliver’s isn’t going bad exactly,” Felicity points out.

Barry smirks. “Yeah, he’s probably having more fun now.”

He’s glad when Felicity laughs with him, though she persists, “Ok, although funny enough their date
technically doesn’t have to be even be over. They’re both going to the same place. And clearly they
do have remarkably similar interests.”

“Something tells me McKenna wouldn’t be too thrilled to find that out,” he can’t help mentioning.
She’s no Lance, but McKenna Hall is still no fan of the Hood. She’d probably be even less so if she
knew her own phone was being used for vigilante purposes.

“You know,” Barry starts, shifts uncomfortably. “I took a bug out of a phone Oliver had given
somebody to contact him with because I thought it was the right thing to do. Now I’ve helped bug a
phone for Oliver…because I thought it was the right thing to do.” He lets out a small groan and
hunches over, elbows braced on the table and fingers sliding into his hair. “What kind of inconsistent
morality is that?”

“Oh no,” Felicity says, pointing a warning finger. “Barry Allen, you do not get to turn around and
develop a conscious as soon as you’ve convinced me to ignore mine. I mean there’s got to be some
difference between the two events that made you decide one was ok and the other not.”

“I guess,” he concludes. Then sighs. “Maybe I should have just tried to attach the transmitter myself.
I’d feel better about it if we hadn’t made it so personal for McKenna.”

“Isn’t it a bit late to tell Oliver not to date her?”

He sits up, shakes his head rapidly. “No. No, I’m not saying he shouldn’t date her.”

Felicity tilts her head to the side. ‘But that’s what’s making it personal, which is your problem.”

“Well yeah, but I’m not- I’m not trying to say he can’t, if he wants. I mean since he wants. It’s better
than everything with Detective Lance’s daughter,” he finally settles for, when Felicity continues to
stare.

After a moment she thankfully turns her gaze back to the computers. “You’re allowed to not
approve. Happens all the time with friends. Like Oliver didn’t seem all that gung-ho about you
hitting the dating scene.”
Barry’s just opened his mouth to tell Felicity he’s not sure Oliver would consider Barry a friend, but instead it transforms into a “What do you mean?”

She glances back at him like she can’t believe he has to ask. “I mean he was perfectly willing to play along when it was about Dig and Carly, but as soon I mentioned you it was all back to business.” Her voice takes on something more of a teasing tone as she adds, “Sound like he knows something I don’t.”

Barry had thought so, too, at first. He’d caught the knowing look and tone from the other man and been floored because how could he possibly know—and then it had occurred to him that no amount of background checking could tell someone just what Barry felt for Iris. So something else had been at work there, but he can hardly guess what much less tell Felicity.

In the present, however, she seems to be fishing for some kind of story, so he relents. “It doesn’t really matter what anybody else knows. I’m not really looking to date. There’s...a girl, back in Central.” He’s rubbing at the back of his neck and ducking his head, more keenly aware than ever before how pathetic this sounds. “I’ve kind of liked her forever, but she thinks we’re just friends.”

Felicity winces in sympathy, then asks, “I don’t suppose your move to Starling had anything to do with that?”

“A bit,” he admits. “At first. I mean, I’m glad I’m here, don’t get me wrong. It’s been about way more than- than that.” And he’s proud to realize that’s true, he hasn’t put much thought into dating anyone, much less Iris, since agreeing to help with Oliver’s mission.

“Good,” she says. “And I hope, if it’s something you want, maybe someday ‘that’ won’t even be an issue.”

“Maybe,” is all he commits to. Not loving Iris would be...well, he’s not sure he knows. Does he want to? “Right now I’m good making morally questionable choices with friends in the foundry.” He means to smile, but winces instead at his own words. “Wow, the unintentional alliteration made that sound way cheesier than I meant it to.”

She affords him an understanding smile, assures, “Friends in the foundry is probably more appropriate than some of the names I have for it. But they’re not that kind of inappropriate, I just mean—” She draws in a breath, seems to collect herself while he waits for her to rephrase, and confesses, “Sometimes I call this the Hood’s Lair. In my head.”

That startles a laugh out of him. “Lair? Come on, Felicity! Cave, it’s gotta have cave in the name.”

She cuts him a shrewd look. “I knew I had you pegged as a comic book fan.”

“You have no idea.”

They’re still brainstorming names when both Oliver and Diggle return, and they have to quickly stifle their giggles. Especially since it seems the other two men have not been very successful in either of their endeavors, judging by their moods.

“Looks like you two had fun at least,” Dig comments, clearly not wanting to discuss his date.

The way it’s said, though, has Barry looking in confusion from the older man to Felicity, who smiles at him. “Uh—”

“We’re going to need a new plan of attack if we want to catch Dodger before he leaves the city,” Oliver states, cutting cleanly through any talk of a ‘two’ happening in the—well, renaming will have
“Um, well, he’s bound to be upset you and the cops stopped him from getting his money. He’ll want to make back his losses and restore his reputation, before leaving the city if he can,” Barry tells him, wheeling his chair to face the other man. “I did some checking. The last piece he just tried to sell, along with several others he’s stolen, come from the Ominous Decade. Which is a pretty bad but awesome way to have the last ten years of you rule named, but see Ferdinand VII of Spain had just been restored after Napoleon’s forces were defeated in the Peninsular War—and you don’t care.”

“No I don’t,” Oliver agrees, and Barry chooses to take the little nod as a congratulations for stopping himself. The older man is already refocusing on the case. “Are there any other antiquities on display from this Ominous thing?”

“Decade,” Felicity supplies. “And no. Starling’s tastes run a little more Elizabethan.”

“So we need to give him one,” Dig states.

“Like a fake?” She asks.

“There’s no way we’d be able to get ahold of one good enough to fool him on such short notice,” Barry tells her with a shake of his head, a frown tugging at his mouth.

Diggle is shaking his head, finding something funny in what they’ve both just said. “You two do know how rich his family is, don’t you?”

He’s changed out of the vigilante getup, and so Barry looks, actually looks at Oliver.

Oliver Queen. Oh right.

Chapter End Notes

Had some fun with different perspectives in this. As well as teasing out different feelings and relationships. The Dodger arc will be finished next chapter and I’m hoping to get into Dead to Rights. Thanks again for reading and as always, let me know any thoughts!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thanks again for all the lovely comments, you guys. I'm really glad to see people enjoying this version of Team Arrow and their interactions. Without further ado, the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry stares with wide eyes as the car turns onto the long driveway. For all the times that he’s hitched rides in Oliver’s car, he’s somehow forgotten till now that Diggle—in name only—is the billionaire’s bodyguard and driver, and that this is where he drops him off each night. A giant mansion.

“I cannot believe we’re sneaking me into your house,” Barry says as the car pulls to a stop at the front door, an ornate wooden masterpiece.

“It’s not sneaking if I’m the one bringing you here,” Oliver dismisses with just the barest of eye rolls. “That my mother and Thea are both at work right now is just a convenience.”

His expression remains neutral when Barry looks back at him, and it’s a slow smile that spreads across his own face. “Right, cause you didn’t plan that at all.”

Up front, Dig checks his watch. “Felicity said she’d have the GPS tracker ready about now. I’ll head over to pick it up, then swing back around. Good luck finding something to attach it to.”

“There’d better be something,” Oliver returns, “I’ve already reserved a spot for it at the auction.” He shuts the door once they’ve both climbed out, and Dig drives away. Oliver then turns to him and sweeps an arm toward the house.

Barry nods and follows him through the entrance. The front room with its lush carpets and extravagant furnishings would be terribly imposing, but it’s offset by a circular table holding flowers and an array of family photographs. They’re mostly of Oliver and his sister Thea, though there’s a clear distinction by the difference in the two’s ages which ones were taken before the Queen’s Gambit was sunk and which ones in the months since Oliver’s returned.

Barry grips the frame of an older photo, turns it to better catch the light. Thea Queen on a beach with white sands stands barely at Oliver’s elbow and has her arms wrapped around her brother’s waist. Oliver is smiling wide and carefree, an ease to the slope of his shoulder that he’s only seen once for himself—when the man was unconscious with a newly stitched up shoulder.

“Barry.” Oliver is halfway up the steps to the second floor, looking down at him expectantly. “We’re here for the antiques, not the albums.”

“Right,” he agrees, hastily setting the photo to rights and taking the stairs two at a time to reach him.

Oliver makes no further comment, instead leading them down the halls of his family home. Barry wonders how none of them get lost. Eventually they reach a long room with wall to wall displays of artwork and artifacts that probably belong in a museum, if his inner Indiana Jones is to be believed.
Even the rugs on the floor look priceless.

“I should’ve brought gloves,” he murmurs.

“Relax, Barry, you’re not at work.” Oliver strolls into the room like it’s any other. “I’m sure you’ll be more than careful. Now we’re looking for something small, easy to carry.”

He lets his curiosity in the various antiques quell his worries about breaking something, but can’t help shaking his head as he examines a jeweled necklace. “It’s so messed up we’re trying to get this guy to steal something just so you can take it back and probably go all vigilante on him.”

“Do you feel bad for him?” Oliver sounds dubious with both eyebrows raised.

“No.” He moves on from the necklace. “I mean, the Dodger uses people and kills them. Guess he’ll just be finding out the hard way there’s some people you don’t steal from.” Barry grins at the other man, and it’s returned in small measure.

Oliver’s mostly leaving the searching to him, since Barry knows the markings of a piece from their target era much better. He bypasses a few portraits, crouches in front of a low display case and slides the glass pane open. He starts taking out each item one at a time, studying methodically.

He nearly drops the fifth one when Oliver’s voice breaks through his concentration. “So what exactly made Ferdinand VII’s last ten years so ominous?” Barry has to crane his neck around to give him a proper disbelieving look.

“I thought you didn’t care.”

The other man shrugs. “You’ve gotten me curious.”

Barry only ups the disbelief in his stare. “You mean bored?” Oliver’s not quite frowning at him, but he has to choke back a laugh at the—probably fake—injured expression he’s wearing. “Seriously, what are you normally even doing right now?”

“Training,” is the blunt answer. Oliver takes a couple steps away, so he returns his gaze to the display cabinet.

“And here I was starting to think the mats and stuff were just for show.”

“You’d see them put to use if you ever got anywhere on time.”

“Hey, you said there wasn’t a start time—Oliver?” He drops the teasing tone, baffled to find the older man gone as he looks back yet again. Perhaps he heard something, or got a call he had to take. Perhaps he thinks Barry’s too distracted talking. So he sighs and redoubles his efforts on the actual task.

It pays off some time later, as he finally comes across an intricate broach that he knows the Dodger will not be able to pass up. Excited, he jumps up and turns at the same time—only to get his feet twisted up in the rug he’s been squatting on. Barry’s eyes squeeze shut and he braces as best he can for impact when his arms have to be cradled into his chest in order to protect the unimaginably valuable antique he’s falling with.

But instead of a floor, it’s a pair of arms that meet him. One goes around his back and the other loops just under his own arms, doubly securing the broach. Holding him up in a sort of hug from the side while his legs are in a tangle and his head bumps and then rests against a sturdy shoulder. Looking up only confirms what empirically has to be true: it’s Oliver’s.
Well this isn’t rom-com levels of bad or anything.

Judging by the absurd expression the other man’s face twists into, he just might have said that out loud.

“You did,” Oliver tells him.

“And that was Felicity levels of bad!” Barry manages on a laugh he hopes doesn’t sound too pathetic or awkward, even while knowing his face is probably a bright red and he can’t quite look Oliver in the face. “I am so sorry.” With a bit of kicking he manages to free his feet from the rug he definitely shouldn’t kick, gets himself standing on his own with a little help. Oliver’s arms come away from him, but before they can fully lower he holds out the broach. “Here, uh, this will do the trick. I should probably not be the one hanging onto it though.”

Oliver smirks. “That’s probably for the best.” Then he reaches up, adjusts the tie that’s now fastened around his neck, and Barry realizes belatedly that the man’s changed into a slim black suit. Not as fitted as the Arrow suit, but still different from the jeans and long sleeves that he knows other man prefers. While he wouldn’t go so far as to say Oliver looks uncomfortable in this, he holds himself a little stiffer, like it’s not just the suit but a whole other guise he’s pulled on with it.

When Barry’s staring is noticed, Oliver says, “The event is black tie. You’ll be good, right?”

That at least knocks him out of his increasingly awkward hovering. Barry takes a step back and tells him, “Don’t have to be a billionaire to own a suit. They’re not checking if it’s Armani at the door, right?”

Oliver cracks a smile and shakes his head. Then his phone buzzes and he checks it. “Dig’s back.”

The other man is standing in front of the car when they come outside and passes over Felicity’s tracker before they all get in. Oliver offers up the broach, holding it steady while Barry attaches the tracker to the underside.

“Felicity says the location is relayed to her phone, so she’ll always know where the broach is,” Diggle states.

“Good,” Oliver replies. “We’ll probably have to let Dodger steal it before making our move.”

“You sure are risk-acceptant,” Barry remarks, checks his watch. “So you guys are going to deliver that to the auction people. When do you want me ready?”

Oliver looks to be considering, but it’s Dig who answers, “Actually Barry, you’ll want to ask Felicity. She’s picking you up on her way to auction.”

He blinks. “Oh. Ok.” Gives a shrug and gets out his phone. “I will give her a call, then.” They’ve pulled up at one of the usual spots near his apartment where he gets dropped, so Barry just gives a nod and exits the car while dialing Felicity. He’ll see them both again soon enough.

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They’re almost to the auction, and John Diggle finds himself glancing not for the first time into the now-silent back. And something causes him to say, “Less suspicious if we don’t all show up together.” Like some kind of explanation. An explanation for what?

So yeah, he might have been the one to suggest to Felicity she pick Barry up. Even if he’s singlehandedly wrecked his chances with Carly it doesn’t mean he’s going to wish ill on anyone
else’s romantic endeavors. As obvious as Felicity’s appreciation of Oliver has been since the first few times they’d gone to see her in her office, her connection with Barry is even more so. The two of them just seem to work very well together, important for any team, and he doesn’t see why that couldn’t develop into something more.

He wouldn’t mind it one bit. Felicity’s a nice young woman and deserves to have somebody special in her life. And Barry, well, that kid has the sort of heart big enough to try and invite even the likes of a battered war veteran and a reticent vigilante inside. John’s been a bit worried for him, honestly, at least until they brought Felicity fully into things. He knows neither he nor particularly Oliver are the easiest to get along with at times, and especially with the sort of open, warm approach that Barry seems to take to things. There’s been a fair amount of rebuffs or disappointments delivered to the young man since he’s come on the team.

But then again there are moments—little smiles or the shortest of laughs, occasions where Oliver’s risen to the challenge, met some cheeky remark with a retort of his own, a hand laid comfortably over the younger man’s shoulder—that make him think maybe Barry hasn’t quite been a glutton for punishment this whole time. And he thinks, much to his own surprise, the scientist was right when he said Oliver is trying. Hell, he never expected the man to have so much patience for getting Barry from place to place, though he isn’t complaining.

And now Oliver is frowning out the window, barely having acknowledged his earlier comment with a nod. He’s been like this since John announced the change in carpool plans and dropped Barry off. But of all the things he’s seen Oliver brood about, this is perhaps the strangest.

When they arrive and he comes around to open the car door, his friend’s got his typical billionaire smile plastered to his face as he goes to speak with the event’s organizers. John stands against a wall, watching with careful eyes where they choose to display the broach and the people coming and going through the room. Oliver joins him just as it’s starting to fill up with guests.

“Felicity’s not planning to let Barry get them here late, is she?”

“Well unless that’s a different blonde on his arm, I don’t think so,” John replies, nodding towards the front entrance. Barry does indeed have Felicity’s arm looped through his and his head ducked down while talking to her, and she looks like a very different woman with her hair down and curled, glasses traded out for contacts, and in a shimmering gold dress.

She catches John’s eye just then, a smile tugging at her lips as the pair walk into the room. Felicity turns to point them out to Barry, and he straightens back up with a broad smile in their direction. They release each other’s arms in favor of holding hands while navigating through the crowds.

“Just managed to duck some of the guys from the station,” Barry tells them, squeezing Felicity’s hand once before letting it drop. “This is so awesome.” With a quick glance to Oliver he amends, “And just part of the job.”

“Felicity, is the tracker working?” Oliver asks.

“Oh yes,” the woman responds, taking out her phone from a handbag, all business once more. “The signal’s good. We’ll know the instant it happens if the Dodger tries to make off with your family jewels.” Then her mouth drops open. “I’m sorry, that came out very wrong.”

“Let’s just keep our eyes open, Felicity,” Oliver states, just about the only thing that could be said at this point.

“Maybe someone should go stand nearby, keep an eye on them?” Barry suggests, then blanches. “It!
It, I meant it, there’s only one broach.” Now both he and Felicity look absolutely mortified, and the night’s only just begun.

“Lingering will only dissuade him,” Oliver disputes, undeniably impressing John with the iron will required to get through this conversation with dignity intact. He’s torn between amusement and pity for the other two members of their team who nod but otherwise avoid eye contact with anyone, especially each other. John frowns to himself; not exactly the best sign that things really can be smooth sailing for the pair.

“I can go check with the guards, see if they’ve noticed anything unusual,” he offers.

Oliver nods, just a bit of gratitude in his eyes. “That’s a good idea. Barry, Felicity keep moving around the room.” Felicity is quick to move away, eyes glued to her screen, though when Barry makes to start after her Oliver grabs at his arm to bring him to a stop, mutters, “You might want to stick to the perimeter to avoid being seen by the cops.”

“Oh, right,” Barry replies, a smile finally making it back on his face, if brief. Changes his path to match Oliver’s advice and is gone through the crowd.

Oliver’s eyes follow his movement, sweep outward over the rest of the room, then land on John. His friend clearly notices the somewhat critical gaze he’s fixing him with. “What?”

“Splitting them up, huh,” John observes, perhaps against his better judgment.

Oliver’s expression turns stern. “We’re here on a mission, Dig, not to socialize. They can do that all they want in their spare time.”

“What spare time? When they’re not at work, they’re doing things for you, Oliver. You know I stopped by the foundry last Saturday morning cause I forgot something, and Barry was there? That’s his day off.” The younger man had been working on something, though had told him it was a surprise.

Oliver looks less stern now, though he’s still frowning. “I thought you were going to check on the guards.”

John sighs. “Yeah, alright.” This isn’t the best location for this conversation anyway, and he’s not even sure what’s brought it on. He and Oliver now split up, and out front it only takes a few casual questions to ascertain from the guards that nothing’s come up.

But when he reenters the main room, he’s accosted by Barry and Felicity, together again. The younger man runs right up to him looking panicked while the woman is standing stock still, eyes wide in some mute horror. Around her neck is one of Dodger’s bomb collars.

“Dig, she tried to stop Dodger, we gotta get this off of her!”

“He said I couldn’t tell the police or— or—I’m gonna get decapitated, aren’t I?” Felicity finally manages, and he reaches out, grips her forearms and gets her to look him in the eyes.

“No, you’re not. Barry, get Oliver, he’s got to get the controller for this thing.” It’s easier to give commands and start examining the collar than to focus on Felicity’s hitched breathing, her begging him to leave and how she’s squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of a terrible fate.

Barry’s quick to return, his phone pressed between ear and shoulder as he also reaches for Felicity’s which she’s been clutching at like a security blanket. “Ok, the tracker’s still working and it says he’s heading towards Adams and O’Neil. He’s got to be in a car if he’s going that fast,” the scientist is
saying to presumably Oliver. A few moments later he says, “Ok, great. Wait, did you just steal some
guy’s—right, not important. Um, he’s a block away. If you’re on a bike you can cut through Harris
Plaza to get closer, but I don’t know which car you should be looking for.”

“Give me back my phone,” Felicity says, voice shaking but determined. Barry does so, and with a
few swipes and pressing of buttons, she pulls up some sort of video feed of the street. “First time
anyone’s ever grateful for traffic cameras,” she manages to joke weakly.

“Felicity, you’re amazing,” John tells her and beside him Barry nods earnestly.

The younger man takes back the phone, seems to be comparing the video feed with the GPS tracker
signal. “Ok, um, he’s the gray sedan driving north, Oliver. Pretty sure.”

“Barry,” Felicity says, the anxiety in her voice apparent.

“Sorry! I’m sure, totally sure. He’s at the light ahead of you, Oliver, taking a right.”

“Barry, please,” she tries again. “Can you—can you hold my hand?”

The scientist’s eyes have been stuck to the phone screen, but then they snap up to her. “Yeah. Yeah,
of course.” It’s made a little awkward by the fact that Barry’s still got his head tipped to the side in
order to hold his phone in place and John is standing there running his fingers over the collar trying
to find a catch or something that could loosen on it, but the other man does as asked nonetheless.
“It’s going to be ok, Felicity. Oliver’s caught up with the Dodger, he’ll get this thing off. You’re
going to be fine.”

Not two minutes later, a beeping noise starts up and the collar pops open. John’s quick to pull it
away and set it to the side, and when he looks back over Felicity is shaking and gasping in Barry’s
arms, face buried in his shoulder while he holds her and pats her on the back.

“Oh thank God!” The woman exclaims not for the first time, though it’s muffled slightly.

Barry is smiling and looking as relieved as John feels. “Hey, you’re fine, see? He did it.” His eyes
dart to the floor for a moment, where John notices his phone has fallen, probably knocked off his
shoulder when Felicity hugged him. “Oliver disconnected when he caught up, should we call him
back?”

He’s asking John, clearly, and he shakes his head. “He’ll make his way back here.”

Felicity takes a step back from Barry after a few minutes, looks to him and John and back. “Thank
you guys for not leaving me.”

“You don’t need to thank us for that,” John tells her.

“Yeah, we’re friends. We’d never do something like that,” the other man insists and while it makes
Felicity smile, it makes him think. Barry’s just put himself and John on the same level when it comes
to Felicity. Has he been reading more into the two’s fast friendship than is really there?

“Nothing like getting a bomb stuck on you to find out who your real friends are,” the woman says
with her usual wry humor. “Not that I’m saying Oliver isn’t a real friend because he left. I mean,
hunting down the guy who stuck a bomb on me is pretty friendship-worthy.”

“I’m glad you think so,” says the man himself, approaching from the side.

Barry looks him up and down. “You just chased a guy down on a motorcycle, made him crash his
car, and probably fought him. How do you still look like that?"

“I disarmed him with a fletchette, Barry, I wasn’t exactly brawling in the street.”

“Where were you even keeping one of—” The younger man falls silent when he catches sight of John shaking his head minutely. Despite his civil tone so far, it’s clear this whole debacle has rattled their friend.

Oliver does even more to prove this when he places his hands on Felicity’s shoulders. “Are you alright?” She nods, fortunately calmer than when the collar first came off. Still, the softer look on Oliver’s face only lasts a moment before he turns serious. “Promise me you won’t go after a known dangerous criminal on your own again. Either of you,” he adds, and holds first her and then Barry’s gaze till they each nod, the latter more hesitant to do so.

“Think we can skip the rest of the auction,” John remarks, and that’s something that gets immediate unanimous agreement. Felicity looks ready to crawl into bed right this second, Barry is looking troubled, and Oliver seems to want this night over and done with.

A simple little case, something not part of the mission, to bring the team together. John shakes his head. Something tells him what’s happened here is going to be affecting them for a while to come. He knows it’s given him plenty to think about, at least.

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Just over a week later, Oliver returns to the foundry after his latest mission as the Hood to the sounds of panted breathing, feet moving across the training mat, and the thwack of someone hitting said mat.

“Again.” Dig’s voice.

He takes the stairs a little faster than normal, pace quickening at the sight that greets him. Diggle training, even without him, is nothing new. But it’s who he’s apparently chosen to take up Oliver’s position that he doesn’t like.

Barry, in sweats and a white shirt that is practically clinging to his skin, accepting a hand up with a look of pure determination screwing up his features as he squares off against a man at least twice his size.

Now, Dig’s not going nearly as fast or hitting nearly as hard as he could, and his voice is pitched somewhere between gentle and firm, the instructor’s range, as he critiques the positioning of Barry’s feet. And it appears he’s already gone through a similar procedure with Felicity, who currently stands to the side with a water bottle and towel. Yet Oliver finds it impossible not to call out before they can start again, “What’s going on here?”

Barry turns, a smile lighting up his face, breathless with excitement and exertion. “Dig’s teaching us how to fight!”

Diggle remains calm and unmoved under Oliver’s stern gaze, now zeroed in primarily on him, as he corrects, “I’m teaching you two how to defend yourself, Barry. That way, if someone attacks you first, you have some measure of control over the situation.”

“Ohhh-kay,” Barry drags it out, takes a step toward him but doesn’t leave the mat. He’s not content
with giving up all the ground this time. “You want to try and explain that one?”

“I thought it was perfectly clear.”

Oliver can practically hear Barry’s eye roll, and he definitely catches the scoff. “Right, well, I’m sure that advice has just slipped your mind all these nights you go out as the Vigilante. Or, you know, the last five years.” His head snaps up sharply, but the younger man isn’t done. “What exactly is your problem?”

He drops the charade of packing things away completely and turns back around. “My problem, Barry, is that it did take me five years to get to where I am today. Five years of constantly struggling to survive. A little bit of training in here is only going to give you the illusion you can fight.”

“Not gang members or armed guards or anything,” Barry concedes, though he doesn’t back down as Oliver approaches. “Just the small stuff, to help. Then if we’re ever all out again, you don’t have to waste time on it and can focus on the main guy.”

Oliver shakes his head. “There’s not going to be a next time if it can be helped.” That any of them think he’s willing to risk that again after what almost happened to Felicity, well, he doesn’t know where they’ve put their good sense. “I need you focused in here.”

“Why is there a distinction?” The younger man practically shouts. “You told me that this wasn’t some nine-to-five, that it wasn’t just some job. That makes it part of my life, and it doesn’t end whenever I walk out of here, same as you.”

He doesn’t have much of a defense for that. And, truthfully, he sees the wisdom in what Dig is doing, that he’s preparing them for the worst, that he’s giving them options. Maybe if it was just Felicity, he wouldn’t be objecting. Because he knows that Felicity is very unlikely to be in a place where she needs to resort to such options, she’s most comfortable at her computers, whether behind a desk at Queen Consolidated or here in the foundry.

Barry, however meek and mild-mannered of a scientist he appears at first glance, has a fire to him, a drive, one that seems to constantly motivate him to get involved as much as possible. Teaching him, even a little, how to fight is just removing another obstacle to his being out there on the mean streets of Starling in its struggle to survive. And he’s not ready to see that, see what it might do to him.

But Oliver doesn’t say any of that, just stares him down, unmoving. And finally Barry looks away and steps off the mat—only to pass him up without a second glance, grab up his jacket hanging off a chair, slip his feet into his shoes and head for the stairs.

“Barry?” Felicity calls, concern being the primary tone, though the slight undercurrent of distress matches the quickening pace of his heart. “Where are you—”

“Going to my paying job. Call me if something needs analyzed or, you know, something else I’m good for,” is the scathing reply, and he knows it’s not for Felicity. The slam of the foundry’s door behind him is something he never thought he’d see from Barry.

He feels two sets of eyes on him, and Oliver frowns. Setting aside his bow—which he’s been gripping with white knuckles—he places the phone he’d brought back from his latest fight in Felicity’s hands and goes over to his book, scratching off Guilermo Barrera’s name. “Barrera was an assassin—”

“Was?”

He grits his teeth. An argument with someone else on this team is the last thing he wants right now.
So he soldiers on, “An assassin for hire with a target in Starling. Whoever contracted him will probably hire someone else for the job, so we need to know the target to keep them safe. I need you to hack his phone.” Felicity nods in his periphery at least, so he relaxes marginally. “I have to meet McKenna.”

“Good thing she didn’t meet you at the heliport,” Dig comments. “May be not such a good idea to fall for the cop who’s trying to hunt you down.” The other man has done a one-eighty in terms of support in Oliver pursuing the woman ever since Lance recruited her for the vigilante taskforce.

“Yeah, well it’s slim pickings for us vigilantes,” he retorts, making for the stairs. The sound of footfalls behind him tells him Diggle’s not ready to end this conversation yet, much to his frustration, so Oliver waits in what will soon be the ground floor of his club and turns to face the other man when he emerges. “What, Dig?”

“You know what else is slim pickings for someone like you, Oliver? Friends, real ones,” the former army man states. “So I got to wonder what you think you’re doing.”

“I am not wrong,” he insists, because for supposedly being his friend first Dig has a nasty habit for telling him he’s messed up when it comes to who they’re talking about. “This started because we needed someone with his skills. So if that’s what he wants to keep it to, I am perfectly fine with that. The less distractions make for a better performance of his job anyway.”

In a tone that brokers no argument, Dig says, “He’s never just been your personal forensics assistant. Even if he was, you can’t tell him what he can and can’t do when he doesn’t have any of that kind of work.” Then the man shakes his head. “And distractions? Really?”

“Well what do you think they are?”

“I think you never had a problem with Barry’s performance until he met Felicity Smoak.” Oliver stiffens, only when Dig’s eyes widen for just a moment he realizes the bold statement for the bluff it was, one that he should have called. Instead he’s just reacted, in a way he’s not sure either of them understand.

“I’m going to be late,” is the only verbal response he gives, and turns on his heel before anything more can be said, his mood all the more mixed up and sourer than it was.

God, he’s glad he decided to get Tommy alcohol for his birthday.

Chapter End Notes

I know, another fight. I’m really, really sorry guys. Had to happen unfortunately, what with the sort of (mostly made-up) love triangle that’s brewing. Have to give credit to Nevraukowen inspiring me to give Dig his last line, so many thanks! Also want to thank everybody for reading, and I’d love to know your thoughts!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Ok so thanks once again for everyone's great comments and support, it means a lot! Didn't want to leave things hanging too long with the angst from last chapter, so here's the next installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barry happens to be in the squad room, dropping off more analysis and reports, when Detective Lance gets a call at his desk. And not from his work phone, however Barry still recognizes the device. He keeps the conversation even shorter and snarkier than usual, which makes it obvious in any case he’s talking to the Hood.

When the detective snaps, “My people don’t work for you,” something churns uncomfortably in Barry’s gut. He gets the rest of it passed out as quick as he can, leaving McKenna’s desk for last. He’s been doing that lately. He doesn’t know why. But he freezes at Lance’s call of, “Hall!”

The woman looks over with a, “Yes sir?”

“You and me,” Lance states, shaking the phone in his hand, “we’re going to catch that vigilante.” Then his eyes slide to Barry. “Allen, you want to do something besides stand around?”

“Uh, yes sir,” he stammers, ignores the sympathetic look McKenna’s fixing him with and hurries up to the safety of his lab. Now instead of standing around he’s sitting around, absolutely nothing to do. Normally he’d be out of here, making his way to the foundry or already there. But not tonight. Nor the next.

What he does do is return to his rickety old apartment building with its broken elevator, climb the steps up to the door of his cramped little home, and spend the time sitting around much like he had before any of this Hood business started. But sometimes he finds himself taking out strips of green micro fabric with a polyester blend, fiddling with them much like he had been when Dig had unexpectedly dropped in at the foundry a couple weeks ago. He brought his work home with him after that, because as he said it was supposed to be a surprise. Now he doesn’t know why he bothers.

Lance isn’t wrong when he says his people don’t work for the Vigilante. Barry thought that he was working with Oliver. But it’s one thing for the man to give him sensible advice about a bad judgment call and rash actions, and another to outright dismiss his legitimate arguments for why the steps he was taking with Dig are necessary. What if he’d been enrolled in self-defense classes when he’d first come to Oliver’s attention, would the man have refused to recruit him?

He wonders, is it a pride thing? Oliver’s so confident in his ability to take on the one-percenters of Starling and the thugs they hire on his own after his five years away surviving who-knows-what. He has Diggle on the team, but the former army man runs the coms more often than actually joining the fray. Doesn’t he get that he doesn’t have to do it alone anymore?

And Barry doubts he’ll ever be at the level of either of those two, practically knows it to be true, but 'not posing a threat in the first place’ smarts. He knows the potency, and therefore toxicity, of a countless number of substances, and which ones can be ingested without detection; knows the
amount of force it takes to break almost any bone in the human body; knows how even the simplest of objects—a kitchen knife, for example—can be turned into the deadliest of weapons. How’s that for not a threat?

But also he knows, when he comes into work just two days after storming out of the foundry to reports that the Hood helped Tommy Merlyn to save his father’s life after a mercenary shot and poisoned him, that who he doesn’t pose a threat to is Oliver. They both know Barry will keep his silence, and know now that his presence on the team or off doesn’t affect Oliver’s mission whatsoever. He’s not needed.

He thought he was wanted.

Barry drops his head to his desk with a groan.

“Oh, so you are miserable. That’s good,” says a familiar voice, and he pops back up to see Felicity standing in the doorway of his lab. “Not that it’s good you’re miserable, I just meant it was a good sign for maybe you helping me to help you not be miserable. If you’re already at the being-miserable stage.”

“Felicity, what do you want?” He hopes it doesn’t sound too rude. It’s not her he’s upset with.

“Come get lunch?” She offers, eyes large and pleading behind her glasses, and it’s clear what she really means is for them to talk.

And maybe he wants to, because it only takes him a deep breath to decide to grab up his jacket and head out of the station with her. They walk side by side for a good five blocks before Barry nods to little sandwich place he knows none of the detectives or beat cops frequent, but is still packed enough that their conversation will go unnoticed.

Once they’ve sat down, he breaks first. “How’re…things?”

“Not great,” she states bluntly. “Oliver had to tell Tommy Merlyn who he was—”

“What?”

“—and the man who shot Malcolm Merlyn apparently also killed John’s brother, and was supposed to be dead, but he’s not and he got away so we don’t even know why the Triad hired him to assassinate Malcolm. So they’re both in very bad places right now,” she continues right over him. “It’s not fun to deal with on my own.”

Barry frowns, a little annoyed at Felicity for trying to guilt him into coming back and a lot annoyed at himself for feeling guilty. “Why is Oliver in a bad place? I mean, I get that he’s not crazy about more people knowing, but Tommy Merlyn’s his best friend.”

“Yeah, well, try a best friend that pretty much called him a killer and now isn’t really speaking to him unless necessary,” Felicity remarks, takes a sip of her drink.

Barry blanches. “He took it that bad?”

She raises an eyebrow. “It’s not that surprising a reaction. But I think, coming from Tommy, it really hurt.”

“But he’s not—I mean, he’s not just a killer. He’s more than that.”

Felicity looks at him with a sad smile. “People like Lance or Tommy, they don’t see it that way. I’m
not sure Oliver does either. Sometimes when you or I or Dig say something he’ll try a different way, but on his own he’d probably keep killing. Cause it’s killers he’s going up against out there, Barry, and I think seeing that every night…that’s why he doesn’t want you learning to fight.”

He gives a frustrated huff. “Being able to fight back would kind of keep me safer from the killers, Felicity.”

She shrugs. “I haven’t figured that part out yet. I did ask Dig what he thought, cause he tried talking to Oliver after you left the other night, but he just told me we needed to give him some space.”

“Great, that’s what I’m doing,” Barry tells her.

Her lips press together in what he’s honestly going to call a pout. “Well don’t because, Barry, I think it’s a terrible idea. Ever since I’ve met you, you have always been this person who- who gets involved, does everything they can. You always try, even if you think you’ll fail. And Oliver, he needs that more than ever, ok? I wish he’d just come down here and say that himself because coming from me it seems way less true,” she gripes, then gives a little shake of her head. “But with things how they are with Tommy, and him and McKenna seem ok but you know there’s no way that’s lasting,” Felicity says with a scoff that makes him smile just a little, “he needs somebody involved, that’s going to push him to be more than, well, what he thinks he is. And even if he won’t let you do that by training, you’ll find a way.”

The smile he has fades. “That’s just it, Felicity. It’s not about him letting me do anything. It may be his mission, but we’re a team. Not his, I don’t know, subordinates or whatever. This is important to me.”

“Important enough not to come back?” She’s worrying her bottom lip now, and he knows if he meets her gaze head-on he’ll be lost.

So he keeps his eyes on the table and says, “Oliver should understand. And he knows where to find me.”

She sighs. Neither of them have touched their food much, but it’s pretty clear they’ve reached an impasse. So they get up head for the door, and it looks like she’ll be going in the other direction rather than back with him so he reaches out, takes her wrist.

“Hey, listen, could you maybe come by the station again in a few days? I’m working on something that I- I think will help. Given the company he’s keeping. It’s…you’ll see what I mean.”

“Not that I’m a delivery service or anything, but sure,” she promises.

He rubs at the back of his neck, knows he’s probably being childish with the middleman routine. “Thanks. And I’ll try and see what evidence or anything the police collected from the assassination. For Dig.”

Felicity’s smiling at him again. “Thanks, Barry.” Then she takes a step forward and hugs him. His arms wrap around her in return and he tries to recall when the last time was he’d gotten one of these. From Joe or Iris when he visited Central, maybe…unless Oliver’s catching him counts. Warm, steady arms wrapped around him, someone sturdy to lean on. There’d been no chance to reciprocate but, he thinks, it counts.

“It’s not the Cave without you, you know.” Her voice breaks him out of his reverie.

Barry pulls back. “Just the foundry,” he jokes. She gives a chuckle, even as she starts walking away backwards.
“You’ll keep thinking up names?”

“Only if you will,” he calls back to her, mirroring her movement until he bumps somebody. “Sorry,” he apologizes. When he looks back up, Felicity has turned away and is disappearing in the crowd.

Barry only wishes the conflictsion he has over his decision would disappear, too.

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It’s the early morning after the opening night of Oliver’s club, the Verdant, and someone is still in Felicity’s good parking spot. She’s coming in now to avoid what will probably be a new traffic flow and also because she made a different trip last night to the precinct.

Barry had called to let her know whatever it was he’d been working on for Oliver was ready. Later than she’d expected but he’d assured her when she’d gotten there that it was due to his increased workload as of late.

“Huntress is back, I guess you’ve heard,” he’d told her. When she’d looked at him quizzically he clarified, “Helena Bertinelli? Has a grudge a mile long against her dad and a crossbow to shoot down it?” He’d given a sigh then. “She and Oliver used to date or something, you should ask Dig for the story. I just would’ve figured he’d have mentioned her being back by now.”

“Oh, well he actually took a break from...you know,” she’d lowered her voice despite them being the only two in the lab, “last night, so I haven’t seen him. But thanks for the heads up sort of.”

He’d shrugged. “Yeah, well, if he needs to know, Detective Lance and, uh, McKenna are working with the Marshall Service. They’re fake-transferring Frank Bertinelli from his safe house to a hearing tonight to try and lure her out, so he might want to take a break tonight, too.”

“You could always come with me and tell Oliver yourself,” she’d suggested hopefully.

Barry had frowned, just as stubborn as their vigilante friend it seemed. “This arrangement’s working for him. It’s fine for me.”

“Well, it’s not so fine for my gas bill,” she’d joked, but resigned had plucked up the small white box he’d pointed out to her when she’d first shown up. “I don’t suppose I’ll be getting a present like this for my efforts. Can I at least take a peak?”

“I’d rather you not,” he’d shifted in his chair, ears tinged just a little pink. “I mean, it’s just an idea for an improvement. He doesn’t have to—”

“I’m sure he’ll be very interested, whatever it is,” Felicity had stated firmly. Of course she’d also been and still is of the opinion that the best improvement that could be made to the team would be Barry’s official return. Oliver’s been busying himself with the club opening, with trying to find new common ground with Tommy, with trying to fit in dates with the very busy cop hunting him, that it hasn’t left much time for Felicity to really attempt a conversation with him about it. Although a few nights ago she’d definitely heard a pause on the steps as the billionaire was leaving for a date he was supposedly about to be late for when she’d started telling Dig about her lunch-talk with Barry.

Now she is physically bringing something from Barry with her, so that ought to give Oliver at least a couple minutes’ pause. If there’s a scale for these things, anyway. Felicity pulls around to a cramped spot in the back, gets out of her car feeling the thump-thump-thump of the bass in her very bones until she enters the foundry portion of the Verdant where it mercifully cuts off.

Because of this, however, she’s able to hear Oliver as she comes down the stairs, the white box
tucked under one arm, “We don’t know where the safe house is. What we do know is that the Marshall Service—”

“Ooh, the fake-transfer thing, right?” She asks, unable to help her excitement because this is exactly what they need. “Barry just told me last night it’s a lure so the police can catch the Huntress.”

“I’m sorry?” An unexpected, decidedly feminine voice asks, and Felicity being the only female—that she’s aware of, anyway—even in the foundry, is something unusual. But it is a woman standing at a table with Oliver and Dig, her gaze practically razor-sharp now on Felicity.

Oliver and Diggle are both incredibly tense, and the former looks angry with just a touch of fear when he whirs around to see her at the bottom of the stairs. “Get out. Get out, this is a private thing—”

“No if she knows more than you do,” the mystery woman speaks up, unafraid to challenge Oliver in his own Cave. “Or her friend does, at least.”

“He’s Oliver’s friend, too,” Felicity asserts, with a pointed look directed at the man. “And since he actually works with the police, he could be here right now and tell you a lot more about the Frank Bertinelli case if Oliver—”

A hand clamps down on her shoulder and Oliver turns her to face him. “Felicity, please.” It’s a dismissal as much as a plea, but the way his eyes dart, truly nervous, for a moment in the direction of this other woman is what really catches her attention.

“Oh. Ok. Um, this is for you.” She holds out the box to him, which he takes but immediately sets aside. Both he and Dig are hardly taking their eyes off the other woman for longer than a few seconds, and Felicity doesn’t think it’s just because she’s beautiful. It’s quiet between the other three as she climbs back up the stairs, so as usual she finds herself filling it. “Private thing with your girlfriend time. How many is that now, exactly?”

No one answers her and she can’t help thinking once again how different it is around here.

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It’s been a long couple days, far longer than he expected. Helena’s return has thrown everything into uncertainty. Between her veiled threats to his family, taking Tommy as a hostage to extort his help, and her rage at the tip-off about the trap the police had been setting her, Oliver is finding it harder and harder to remember what he saw in her.

They weren’t so dissimilar before. Now, however, something’s changed in him, something he’s glad for if it saves him from becoming that. A large part of his change, he knows, he owes to those of his team.

And so he’s right back to where his brain has been leading him in circles for nearly a week now, reminding him in any number of ways about a certain member of that team. Until recently, anyway.

Dig, fortunately, hasn’t said a word to him about it since that night, though that certainly doesn’t mean the other man is happy with how Oliver is handling things. Felicity is far less subtle, making sure to mention the scientist whenever possible, giving Oliver reproachful looks over the rims of her glasses, dating Barry anyway.

It’s probably inconvenient for them both that Oliver’s apparently run Barry off the team, if the many entreaties the IT expert has given him to just talk to the younger man are anything to go by. Yet she always seems to phrase it like it’s for his own good or that it’s what Barry needs to hear if Oliver
wants him to come back at all.

But Barry’s still finding ways to aid him from afar, it seems, his information given through Felicity about the fake transfer of Frank Bertinelli saving Helena and perhaps himself a close encounter with the police. Without any leads to go on, he’d pointed out, Helena’s mission was as good as over. So Oliver had confiscated her crossbow and arranged a one-way plane ticket to Europe for the vengeful woman, and angry as she was at her chance being stolen away from her he doubts she’ll much want to hang around the site of her failure.

To him, Helena is something of a failure, his attempt to transform her desire for revenge into one for justice doomed from the start. And it’s all just a painful reminder that for how different they are, in many respects they are or have been the same. No matter how hard his team tries.

Oliver wants to try a new tactic. He shows up at McKenna’s door. She’s pleased to see him; work has provided yet another frustration, the Huntress inexplicably didn’t take the bait and now they feel they’ve lost her. The knowledge of where he’s sent Helena off to, far from inquiring detectives hoping to bargain his identity out of her, sits troubled inside of him.

“I feel like I’m letting everybody down,” he confesses. “My family and Tommy and you and…” There’s so much he won’t ever tell her, like one simple little name—Barry is loud in his own head, completing that list—that would cause so many questions he doesn’t want to answer, least of all the ones he’s asking himself.

McKenna’s trying her hardest to understand, convince him he can pull through and make it work, and when he asks her—unfairly—how to possibly do that she tells him, “The first thing you do is you find yourself someone you never have to apologize to.”

There’s so many apologies he’d have to give McKenna, if she ever knew the truth. Like the fact that he knows he’ll never give her the truth. And maybe then he’d have to apologize for this slow slide of their bodies into oblivion together. Because he knows they’re each a far cry from that ‘someone’ she talks about for each other.

Later, as she sleeps, he checks his phone, sits up like a shock’s just been sent through him at the missed call and voice mail he’s gotten. From Barry.

Hardly daring to believe it, Oliver rolls out of bed, paces to the far side of the room, and plays the message.

“Hey, Oliver…look, I know things have been not…great. I—ugh.” It’s almost impossible not to picture the cringe Barry must have made at his own words. He doubts the scientist leaves many messages if he can avoid it. “This is, it’s not easy. Which is probably why neither of us has done anything about it, but…” He hears the puff of air from the younger man heaving a sigh. “I am, I guess. I still want to talk. About our fight about not fighting, or, you know. Cause it may not be the whole mission, or even a big part but…it’s important to me.” Oliver’s eyes squeeze shut for a moment at the memory; him telling a self-conscious Barry that what he thought and felt mattered to the team. Mattered to him. And this past week he’s just about proved that’s been forgotten.

But the voicemail isn’t even over, and he’s picking up the sounds of passing cars indicating it was made on the walk home. He shifts his weight, acceptant of a long listen. “Anyway, more importantly I just caught a police report on my way out that there’s been a robbery, local sporting goods store. Huntress is supposed to be in town, but she never showed for a staged transfer of her father. I’m thinking if she did steal the crossbow she might be switching targets, so you want to be careful—”
“Don’t worry,” he’s only barely able to make out another voice, but he would recognize it anyway, and his blood runs cold. “Oliver isn’t the one in trouble. Barry Allen, right?” Helena’s cool yet smug tone gets louder and he can only assume that’s because she got closer. To the phone, to Barry. “We haven’t been properly introduced.”

There’s a clatter and the line goes dead.

Chapter End Notes

And I left you guys with a cliffhanger this chapter. Whoops! Let me know your thoughts in the comments, and thanks so much for reading!
Ok, because the cliffhanger was so cruel I have worked tirelessly to finish this next chapter. And it's even longer to boot! Just a warning: in the tags I've mentioned Canon Typical Violence. That very much applies in this one. Other than that, I hope you all enjoy!

When she’d scoped out the station and looked in on him—Barry—he wasn’t at all what she’d expected.

*Works with the police*, the petite blonde—Felicity—had said. She hadn’t mentioned he was some scrawny lab tech in a plaid shirt and thin cotton sweater straight out of college, that he was a fumbling smiley naïf, that he looked easy to break. Helena wonders how Oliver’s found these people, but she hardly wonders why; after trying to use her, mold her thinking into his own ideals, these two must seem like child’s play. They and the detective—Hall—are probably a boost to his already inflated ego.

And yet as she tails the young man, it seems there’s trouble in paradise after all, some little spat he’s had with Oliver over something about the man’s methods. She can sympathize. Except it makes Helena want to gag at the lonely note in his voice, the way his heart is practically put on display, placing himself at Oliver Queen’s mercy much like she once did. He’s only setting himself up for disappointment.

She won’t mind disabusing him of the notion that dear Oliver will ever be there for him when it matters most. That his favor extends any farther than the limits of a person’s usefulness to him and his precious mission.

Barry’s sickening little supplication is winding down it seems, and he’s kind enough to give her a truly perfect opening. His words turn to that of her recent activities—news travels fast with her kind of reputation—and he voices his most prevalent fear. “I’m thinking if she did steal the crossbow she might be switching targets, so you want to be careful—”

“Don’t worry,” Helena calls out with mock sweetness to the younger man, who freezes for a second before turning slowly. His eyes widen in recognition almost immediately when she steps out of the shadows, and she’s so very glad she’s left an impression on at least some of Oliver’s little band of followers. They won’t ever forget her now. “Oliver isn’t the one in trouble. Barry Allen, right?” Like she needs to check.

Not bothering to wait for a response, Helena swings the crossbow around, knocking the phone out of his hand and when it falls at her feet she crushes the heel of one boot down with a satisfying *crack*. He stumbles back a few steps, right into the wall, but she’s leveled the crossbow and fired by the time he makes to dart to the side.

“Ah!” Blood spurts from a cut just across his cheek, a shallow little thing, but he still gapes at her in pain and fear. Good.
Helena presses in, the tip of the crossbow pointing right at his neck. She can feel the rapid pulse just jumping underneath and it’s exhilarating. “I’d like to keep this short. Tell me where Frank Bertinelli’s safe house is right now and I’ll let you go.” It’s mostly a lie; she can’t have him running back to the cops, but he’ll be unharmed.

“Wha-what? Why would I—how’d you know that I—”

“Let’s just say a mutual friend,” she tells him with the briefest of smiles. “Now give me the location.”

His hands are clenched in fists at his sides and he’s breathing harshly through the nose, but she’s honestly surprised when he gives a shake of his head. So Oliver’s helpers are made of tougher stuff than it seems. Or at least they think so.

Helena hauls her free arm back with no warning and delivers a swift punch to his gut, is nice enough to move the crossbow and let him hunch in on himself with an “Unh!” of pain for a moment before gripping him by the shoulder and slamming his back against the wall again.

“I wouldn’t try playing hero with me. My father’s not worth the effort.” The one hit, she’s hoping, ought to be enough. She’s short on time and she’d really rather save her strength.

“Then why…bother hunting him…in the first place?” He manages to get out through gritted teeth. Her eyes narrow. “Unh!”

“I don’t need your cute little comebacks or whatever it is Oliver keeps you for,” she informs him harshly. “I just need the information you have.”

Helena watches him sway on his feet, bring a hand up to swipe at his mouth and face, smearing the blood that’s been trailing down his jaw. Then he looks her straight in the eye and says, “I don’t give up that fast.”

“Then I’ll have to pick up my pace,” she snarls. The next few minutes are only filled with the grunts and groans of his suffering until he’s nearly doubled over. “This is all so pointless for you,” she tells him, letting up for a few moments. “You’re only hiding a mobster and a murderer, and you’re not stalling for some grand rescue. I know you were leaving a message. It could be hours before Oliver even bothers to listen to it.”

His gaze, fixed on the alley floor before, darts to her face and she knows she’s hit some kind of nerve. Helena readies her crossbow, points it right between the eyes.

“Guess you’re not so important after all…but you can be to me.”

When his eyes squeeze shut and his head bows, that’s when she knows she might just have beaten Oliver at his own game.

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As soon as he can practically jump back into his clothes, he is out McKenna’s door without so much of a note, taking his bike at speeds guaranteed to get him pulled over should he happen upon a cop to the foundry. Oliver has to hope that Helena’s done this on purpose, that she’s let him hear her in order to get his attention, that he’ll find her waiting for him there with another ultimatum.

The thought that this time it’d be Barry pinned down to the table, arm wrenched into a painful angle and one of Helena’s hands wrapped around the base of his neck has him revving the engine even harder, faster.
But the foundry is empty. Oliver wastes no time to change into his Hood gear, anger and fear and guilt creating an awful torrid mix in him far stronger than he’s felt in a long time, stronger than he thought even possible anymore. What is Helena’s plan, why does it involve Barry, what is she **doing** to him, been doing while he’s been wrapped up in sheets and a warm body—

He needs to find them, find Barry, and to do that he calls Felicity. “Where are you?”

“Hello to you too,” is her bemused reply. “In my office, why?”

“Lock your door,” he demands. Until he tracks down Helena and finds out what she’s after, none of them are safe, even in a corporate office with layers of security. “Then I need you to ping Barry’s phone.”

“Oliver, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?” She asks, but he can hear her moving around to do as he’s said.

“Helena hasn’t left.” He’s back on the bike now, switching over to an earpiece to talk to her. Even without an exact location he can at least make his way to the vicinity of the precinct. Barry would have been walking, alone, through the night to his apartment. He wouldn’t have gotten very far, but there’s any number of lonely streets or alleys Helena might have chosen for her ambush.

“So you heard about the crossbow robbery,” Felicity is saying. “I tried calling you, but the line was busy—”

“Barry called me, but he was interrupted. By Helena. Felicity, are you pinging his phone?”

“Oh! Yes, yes I’m—” there’s a new urgency to her voice now, one he can appreciate because it nearly matches his own “—it’s giving me a location ten blocks northeast of the precinct. There’s an alley called Garrick.” He swerves into the left lane amid the honking of several cars in order to correct his course. “Oliver, he’s going to be ok, right? Barry’s going to be fine?”

If only someone would tell him that. But he does his best to soften his tone for just a moment. “Yeah, yeah I’m almost there.” What he’ll do beyond arriving there depends on what he finds, and each possibility he contemplates is worse. “Call Dig, ok?”

“Ok.” She sounds small and scared, but hangs up. It leaves him with nothing but his thoughts for the rest of the drive. But soon enough he’s screeching to the stop at the mouth of the alley, throwing the helmet back onto the seat as he pelts down the shadowed path.

“Barry!” He gets ten, fifteen feet in. Nothing. Oliver takes another step and his foot kicks something on the ground, a phone with a cracked screen goes skidding and stops when it smacks against the dumpster.

Sticking out just beyond the dumpster are a pair of familiar converse attached to somebody’s legs.

“Barry?” He darts around the dumpster and feels a flood of tremendous relief. The scientist is lying on his side, arms bound behind him at the wrists and legs bound together, but **here**. His eyes are closed, and when Oliver crouches down and cups the younger man’s face in his hand to turn it towards him he sees dried blood from a shallow cut on one cheek and a dark, ugly bruise forming at the temple.

His fingers trace over it and there’s a whimper of pain from Barry as his eyelids flutter once, twice. Then he’s leaning heavily into Oliver’s hand as he emits a groan. “Hey, hey easy,” Oliver says, voice pitched low and gentle so as not to further aggravate what he knows must be a terrible headache. His other hand is braced on Barry’s back, rubbing small circles into the shoulder blades.
Barry’s peering up at him now, and it’s like for a moment he can’t seem to believe what he’s seeing, that it’s possible. “Oliver?” It’s colored with surprise with just a hint of the happiness he usually reserves for him.

“Yeah,” he says, not even having to force the smile on his face. “Yeah, I got your call.”

Barry, however, grimaces. “Oh. Yeah. I like your mafia better than hers. You totally owe me a new phone. Think she stepped on it.” He’s starting to fidget, doing his best to sit up without the use of his arms or legs. Oliver removes the hand at Barry’s back to get out his knife, keeping his hold on the other man’s face. Barry’s cheek, the one not nicked by an arrow, is already pink from having scraped against the ground, and Oliver brushes away the dirt and grime on it with his thumb.

“That’s not all she did.” He’s finished cutting at the bonds, goes to tuck the knife back away so he can maneuver the younger man into a sitting position. But then there’s running footsteps coming fast towards them, with purpose, and he is instantly on his feet planted firmly in front of Barry, whirling around to face the attacker with his arm raised and knife ready to throw.

Except it’s Dig, who raises a hand as if to further convince him of his good intentions. Oliver lowers the knife, but he’s still breathing hard, blood pounding in his ears, adrenaline kicked back up into high gear since finding Barry.

“Hey, Felicity sent me here. What happened?”

“Helena,” he practically growls the name, and it’s so easy to let the venom into every syllable now, to see her for everything Diggle always claimed she was. All the hatred and the rage and the collateral damage as she works to achieve her dark, bitter ends. Leaving Barry unconscious and trussed up for anyone to find, to use, once she’d gotten whatever she wanted out of him.

And it’s Barry who’s now staggering to his feet who provides the answer. “She wanted the address to the safe house where her father’s being kept. There’s a task force partnering with the FBI Marshalls, but I don’t know how she knew I knew. I didn’t want to tell her, but I—” The scientist takes a step toward them and winces, clutching at his abdomen. “Sorry. Sorry, Oliver.”

“He takes two steps, reaches out to frame Barry’s face with both hands, forcing him to meet his gaze again. “It’s not your fault. You don’t have to apologize, not to me.” Barry holds his stare, even as he gives a small nod.

Then an “uh,” is stuttered out on a breath when Oliver drops one of his hands to rake up the younger man’s shirt and sweater to view more than a couple larger, splotchy bruises littered across his skin. Not life-threatening, but if he’s wincing that means internal bruising…or worse. All without mentioning the possibility of concussion.

He tugs the clothes back down and turns back to their other friend. “Get him to the hospital.” And Oliver’s so thankful he had the foresight to have Felicity get in touch with Dig, because it’s only the knowledge that he’s leaving Barry with someone he trusts that’s letting him pull away and take the first few strides out of the alley. Time is short.

“What are you going to do, Oliver?” The former army man calls after him.

His fists clench and a scowl is set on his face when he looks back once. “What I should have done in the first place.”

Helena had crossed the line a long time ago, but now he’s no longer blind to it. And it’s his responsibility to make sure this never happens again.
Oliver reaches the expansive lawn of the safe house in time to stop Helena’s pursuit of her father across the darkened grounds. And she has the gall to taunt him, now of all times. “You won’t kill me. You’re not a murderer, remember?”

There are those who have told him this, that he’s better than someone of her level, but he’s not doing this for the killing. He’s doing this to keep others safe. There’s no apology and his aim is steady as he lets the arrow fly.

The look of betrayal that flashes on her face when she catches it inches from her heart transforms in an instant to fierce anger, and they struggle in close combat, both fighting for their lives now and any pretense that they might both walk away from this dropped.

She’s not silent when he at last gains the upper hand. “I hope your little cop friend—and I don’t mean the detective—has learned just how quickly you’ll turn on someone you professed to care for. He only gave up this location when it was clear you weren’t coming to save him.”

The bowstring is drawn back far with this next arrow that he guarantees won’t miss. But then it is McKenna who shouts, “Enough! Freeze!” It’d be so easy to just ignore, let go. Yet he listens. “Put it down. Turn around. Slowly.” He keeps his head ducked to hide his face and misses Helena shouldering her weapon and firing.

“No!” It’s practically wrenched out of him as McKenna crumples and he runs to her. “McKenna?”

Helena will be gone by the time he looks back; they both do walk away. Yet he fears the Huntress might have killed something just starting in him all the same. As if she hasn’t already dealt him enough pain tonight.

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John watches Oliver mount his bike and zoom off to stop Helena. For good this time, if his words were anything to go by. Gratified as he might be to know Oliver’s finally come around to seeing things as they are when it comes to her, he has to wonder at the cause.

Barry’s slumped back against the wall when he turns back, looks like the breath’s been just about stolen out of him. He catches John staring and raises a hand. “Just, give me a minute. Then we can head back.”

“Back where?”

“The foundry,” he answers plainly, like it’s obvious. Pushes off the wall with one hand hovering over that lump on his head and the other arm wrapped around his middle.

“Oh no,” he says slowly, shakes his head. “Oliver said hospital, in case you didn’t hear, and I agree with him.”

Barry looks at him with pleading eyes. “C’mon, Dig. I don’t need a hospital stay for something like this. Tony Woodward dished it out way worse in high school.”

“Oh-huh,” he says, though doubting that. He’s yet to see a high school student threaten someone with a crossbow and beat a location out of them. And Barry is more than willing to accept his help when he comes over, slings one of the scientist’s arms around his shoulders and starts walking them to the car.

“What’re we even going to tell them? If I say I was attacked by the Huntress, there’s going to be an investigation, and they’ll want to know why she picked me to go after, and that goes right to Oliver.
Except I don’t really get how she knew about me and Oliver. I meant how I work with Oliver,” he adds as John helps him into the passenger seat. “I think I’m absorbing Felicity’s awkwardness through osmosis.”

“Haven’t you already got enough of your own?” John asks. “Actually, you should call and let her know you’re ok.” He lends the younger man his phone and gets in the driver’s side.

“Ok, but we should figure out what our story is first,” Barry replies.

John thinks for a moment. “You got any cash in your wallet?”

“Oh, I think, yeah. Some ones, a ten…” Barry’s fishing around in his pocket, finds his wallet and checks through. “Hey, couple twenties!”

“All right,” he says, then reaches over and plucks the bills out, tucking them in his pocket. “You got mugged,” he tells Barry’s stunned expression.

“Oh yeah?” The other man asks on a laugh, then winces. “Ow.”

“I’ll give it back later,” he promises and starts the car.

“Sure you will,” Barry says, jokingly suspicious, and John cracks a smile. It’s been a solid week since he’s seen the younger man, and he’d be lying if he said he hasn’t missed this. If Oliver’s gentler behavior, his guarding movements towards Barry in the alley were anything to go by, he clearly has, too.

John’s not sure he’s ever seen Oliver that willing to reach out and touch someone, that willing to turn about and kill on sight any perceived danger.

The one out of their team who’s seen Barry more recently is still the most vocal about her relief when she answers the phone. “Oh thank God, you’re ok! I was having a little mini panic session in my office all by myself because Oliver told me to lock the door, but I am definitely unlocking it and meeting you guys at the hospital.”

“You really don’t have to, Felicity, you should go home, get some sleep,” Barry tells her.

“Not a chance, I am way too awake right now,” she replies. “I mean when Oliver called I was ready to start believing the apocalypse was real, he sounded so worried.” She’s laughing a bit at that now, but Barry looks bewildered.

“Seriously?”

“Yep, so really don’t do something like that to him again. Unless you can’t help it, like now. I’m not blaming you for getting attacked or anything, it’s- it’s actually sort of all my fault.” Now there’s a heavy amount of guilt in her voice. “I mentioned you when she was right there in the Cave. I didn’t realize—I just wanted Oliver to stop pretending it wasn’t bothering him you were gone. He’s worse at that than the lying.”

“Felicity, it’s ok,” Barry says. “You didn’t mean for it to happen. Oliver’s going to stop her anyway, so it’s no big deal. Look we’re basically here, so we’ll see you, ok?”

“Yeah, ok.”

John shuts off the engine and comes around in case Barry still needs help getting from the parking lot to the building. When the younger man first passes him his phone, however, he shoots it and then
him a questioning glance. “The Cave?”

Barry’s eyes widen and his face turns a bit pink. “Uh…that’s kind of a funny story.”

John shakes his head, pockets his phone, and lends the other man a hand. He thinks there’ll be time yet to learn about this inside joke between friends.

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Barry feels awful. Well, physically, he’s fine. The pain meds are doing more than enough to ease the soreness in his gut and behind his temples. They’re letting him out after just one night, provided he follow a close list of instructions and take it easy.

But no, what’s really the awful part is how McKenna Hall is now lying in a hospital bed in the ICU with a shattered femur from Huntress’ crossbow. Because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut, couldn’t hold out just a little longer, couldn’t take it. He’s helped wreck her career, her life, her relationship. And that he has to feel doubly guilty for.

He’s about ready to head back to his apartment, curl up in a ball in his bed, and be miserable like he has been the past week but for even more reasons, so he gets himself discharged.

At the front desk, he’s just gotten a receptionist’s attention. “Hi, um, would you have the number to call a cab?” He doesn’t much feel like walking right now, nor does he think he’s supposed to.

But then there’s jogging footsteps behind him and the last voice he wants to hear right now—for probably the first time ever—calling out to him. “Barry?”

Oliver is standing there when he turns around, bags under his eyes reminiscent of that greasepaint he still wears as the Hood, shoulders a little more slumped but otherwise alert and aware, looking at him expectantly. “Uh, hey,” is all Barry can come up with.

“You weren’t in your room.” He hadn’t realized Oliver even knew which room he’d been in, though he supposes he could have easily gotten the information from Dig or Felicity.

“Yeah, well, I discharged myself, so…” Barry scuffs his shoe back and forth, can feel Oliver’s stare just waiting for him to look back up.

When he does, the older man tilts his head toward the exit. “Come on. I brought the car.”

And it’s an open invitation, so really should he feel bad taking it? “No Dig?” He has to ask as they enter the parking lot side by side.

“I do drive myself from time to time,” is Oliver’s wry response before he soberes. “And no. No, I was…visiting McKenna.”

Just like that, it’s as if he isn’t merely numb, but that his insides have just plummeted down, down, down into some deep pit. They’ve reached the car and Oliver opens the driver door, ducks as if to get in, then stops when he realizes Barry isn’t making a move to do likewise. He straightens back up and raises an eyebrow.

Barry doesn’t bother beating around the bush. He’s tired and guilty and the band aid on his face itches. “Can you please take my apology now?”

Oliver’s voice sounds tight when he replies, “What Helena did was unforgivable. To both of you. And it’s not something I intend to forgive.”
Barry looks at him flatly over the top of the car. “You know what I mean.”

“I know you’re not making any sense,” the older man counters, then folds his arms, braces them on top of the car and leans forward. “And I know I meant what I said last night. You don’t have to apologize.” Then he actually does get in, leaving Barry little choice but to do so as well if he doesn’t want to be standing around like an idiot.

“Feels like I don’t get to apologize,” he huffs to himself as he opens the door, less than gracefully drops inside.

“Do you mind if we drop by the foundry?” Oliver poses it completely casual, and it would be if it weren’t for the fact that Barry hasn’t been there for over a week.

But he manages to affect a nonchalant tone of his own that he’s pretty proud of when he answers, “No, that’s ok.” The smooth rhythm of the car rolling through the city and the purr of the engine lull him into some sort of half-dozing state soon after, however, and then he probably looks the opposite of cool and collected.

“How much painkiller did they pump into you?” Oliver asks, vaguely amused, when they round a corner and Barry simply lets his head flop onto one shoulder with the momentum of the turn.

“Don’t know. But they work.” He thinks one or the other of them might be about to laugh, it seems like the sort of thing you laugh at person on painkillers for, but then he feels more than sees Oliver stiffen in his seat, slowing the car marginally.

“Tommy.”

Barry shakes the drowsiness in order to sit up. They’ve reached the Verdant and there’s a very expensive car parked in the lot that he assumes must be the younger Merlyn’s. “Uh, should I wait in here or…?”

“Take the back entrance into the foundry. I’ll probably just be a few minutes.” There’s something kind of defeatist in his expression as he says it, like he doubts his supposed best friend could ever want an extensive conversation with him again.

But they’ve parked so he climbs out and goes around back while Oliver enters from the front. The foundry is vacant aside from himself, and there’s a conversation happening over his head. It’s only been a couple minutes before he decides to take the stairs up to the door that lets out into the club, ease it open. He’ll blame the meds if he’s caught.

There’s no shouting or angry accusing going on like Felicity has led him to believe. Instead there’s just Oliver’s voice, heavy with regret. “I was wrong to think that I could have it both ways; that I could do what I do and still have a normal life. With anyone.”

“Except if you’re alone,” an unfamiliar voice, most assuredly Tommy, “you’re never going to be happy.”

“Maybe not. But me being happy isn’t what’s important right now.”

He knows, has known deep down, that this must be what Oliver’s been feeling since last night. Since all his chances with McKenna were ripped away. Despite his and Felicity and Dig’s misgivings about a relationship with the detective, it’s plain to see she really meant something to him. Normalcy. A life and future. Things he’s now decided he can’t have.

When Oliver does return in the promised few minutes, Barry’s sitting in one of the chairs with his
gaze locked on his hands in his laps as he comments, “If you’re not going to be happy, I’d rather you not pretend you were just to make me feel better about screwing things up for you.”

“Barry, what’re you—” He shoots a brief look at the door he just came through, and finally does look somewhat irritated when he turns back to him. “You didn’t screw things up, alright? Helena made the choice to shoot that crossbow, and McKenna’s decided she wants to focus on her rehab and her new life in Coast City. None of that has anything to do with you, and I do not think it does. So I’d rather you not keep trying to provoke me to— to turn on you.”

They stare at each other for a long moment, before Barry gives a snort. “Turn on me? What, all ‘curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal’ style?”

The older man had looked affronted by the snort, but now he just seems confused. “What are you even talking about?”

Barry does the quick mental math. “Nope, not ok that you missed Firefly. That one’s totally on you. 2002.”

Oliver’s lips quirk upward as he remarks, “Something tells me it probably wasn’t my taste.”

“Ok, yeah, probably.” Barry grimaces, thinking of tabloid magazine covers Iris used to flip through while waiting in line at the grocery store. Of course, remembering his situation with Iris gives him something of an idea to say, “You know, it won’t be so bad after a while. McKenna being gone. I mean, I get that it hurts, I totally do,” he hastens to add when the other man’s expression shutters. Barry heaves a sigh, hands coming to rest at the base of his neck. He’s already told Felicity, so he may as well, particularly if it could help. “Thing is, I sort of did what she did. Kind of. I mean, I wasn’t injured or anything, but…I’ve always liked somebody back in Central. She just sees us as friends, though. So part of why I picked the job here in Starling was because I just didn’t want to be hanging around waiting for something that wasn’t going to work. And moving here’s made things easier, especially lately. All this,” he waves a hand around the room. “really takes my mind off things with Iris. But I’m still happy, you know? Even if it’s not a normal-type life…”

He’s trailing now, rambling badly, but it’s hard not to when Oliver is fixing him with the strangest look. When he finally stops and tilts his head questioningly, the other man gives his a minute shake. “Sorry. I just—I thought…you were dating Felicity.”

Barry blinks, and a laugh’s startled out of him. “What? No, no, we’re just friends. Who said that?”

“No one,” Oliver replies quickly. “You just seemed…you go to lunch.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, slowly, “like friends do. You know, to hang out outside of work or mission or whatever we’re calling it. Like this, right now.” He gestures between them.

Oliver takes that in with a nod, though he’s adopted that stoic look and his expression gives nothing away. “Right. Friends.”

“Yes. Glad you said something, though, that would’ve gotten weird,” Barry says with some relief, if not a giddy sort of feeling at Oliver’s indirect admission that they are, in fact, friends. Then he pushes himself out of the chair. “Actually, can we get lunch or food or something? I haven’t had anything since yesterday.”

“Sure,” Oliver agrees, but stops him with a hand on Barry’s arm before he can pass the other man up for the stairs. “Barry, why I brought you here… I just wanted to say that, once you’ve recovered
anyway, all this,” he nods out at the training mat and various equipment, “is for everyone on the team to use. If they want.” When Barry turns to him in amazement, the other man’s eyes flick to meet his briefly. “It was wrong of me to believe that the danger I’ve asked you all to invite into your lives wouldn’t follow you outside of these walls. And I’m not able to be there every time something does happen.”

“Hey, it was late. You got to sleep sometime,” he points out. Oliver gives a cough, doesn’t lift his gaze from the mats. “And what do you know,” Barry tries a new tactic, waits for the other man to turn to him before tapping just below the bruise on his head, “this was good for something after all.”

Oliver doesn’t look angry, but he’s certainly not smiling when he says, “We’ll be making sure this doesn’t happen again.” He shifts his grip on Barry’s arm, gets them walking towards the stairs.

“What do you mean?” He can’t help asking.

“I’m going to train you,” is the plain answer, but Barry can’t believe it.

“Really?”

Oliver looks him over. “Not until you’re recovered, but yes.”

“Yes,” Barry takes the last two steps at once, pumps a fist. “This going to be awesome.”

Oliver’s looking at him with some mix of amusement and pity. “Oh, don’t look that excited, you’ll be wishing for Dig.”

It doesn’t stop Barry from grinning all through lunch.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, did my best to end things on a fluffier note after all the angst and drama from the last couple chapters. Next one will be moving on to the events of "Salvation". I'd love to know any and all thoughts as usual, and thanks so much for reading!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Ok, everybody seemed glad to see Barry and Oliver repairing their friendship last chapter. Time for things to develop a little further...enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She really shouldn’t be enjoying this so much. But really, with the way Oliver’s laid out his Cave, it’s like he’s planned for an audience. Her computers sit right in front of the training mats, making it oh so very easy for Felicity to take a quick peek over the tops of the screens every so often. Which usually turns into staring.

But can she really be blamed for getting some occasional ogling in during his training of Barry? Looking is hardly doing any harm when the two of them aren’t even keeping their hands off each other.

Why does she have to think these things?

She’d been happy to hear that Barry and Oliver had come to an agreement on this. Though she has to wonder, wincing in sympathy when the scientist is knocked for the umpteenth time onto his back, if Barry is so happy about it now. She’ll stick to her sessions with Dig, thanks.

Oliver’s still holding back, of course. That’s evident enough to see in the difference between this and the warmups he did alone before the younger man arrived and got ready. When Barry had shown up to the foundry earlier than usual for this new routine of theirs, it had taken Felicity a minute to notice he’s drawn right up to her side.

He hadn’t seemed to mind, too busy gazing like she was at a shirtless Oliver going up the salmon ladder. Steady, measured, the muscles of his scarred chest and arms rippling with the movement. It’s always a sight.

“I never knew what that was for,” Barry had confessed faintly as Oliver reached the top and started doing curl-ups.

“Oh yeah, he does that once a week,” Felicity had told him. “At least.”

“At least?”

“Having second thoughts?” She’d guessed, giving him a shrewd look.

Barry had swallowed once, his eyes had flickered to her and then back to Oliver, and he’d shaken his head. “No.”

And he’s yet to call it quits in the present, even when he’s lying there, winded and sweaty and hot. Like the temperature. Oliver hasn’t had to put in quite the same exertion, yet he’s breathing heavily with a challenging light to his eyes and a grin on his face when he leans down, clamps his hands around Barry’s upper arms as the younger man does his, and hauls him up.

“You alright?” He’s been asking that periodically throughout the session whenever Barry hasn’t
immediately moved to get to his feet.

“Yeah,” Barry pants. “Yeah, just give me a second.”

“You’re not going to be given seconds out there,” the older man reminds him, but remains in place, waiting.

“Oh, we’re doing the smart comments, too? Not like you don’t already get to pound me into the mat.”

Felicity squeaks. “Barry, rephrase!”

“Wha—oh!” The scientist half-turns to her before seemingly getting it, then his eyes jump back to Oliver even as he staggers a couple steps away, whole face red now in a furious blush. “Oh, wow. Um, I did not mean—”

“Yeah, got that on my own,” Oliver cuts him off with a nod, looking if anything vaguely amused by the pair of them.

“Might be a good time to take a break,” Diggle suggests. The former army man’s been at the computer next to her, although she doubts he’s been paying as much attention to what’s been happening on the mats as she has. “Especially if you want to pay John Nickel a visit tonight.”

Oliver nods and walks off the mat, grabs up his Hood gear to change. “Right. Barry, we’ll pick up tomorrow.” He throws a towel to the younger man that Barry manages to just avoid fumbling.

“Who’s John Nickel?” Felicity can’t help feeling some residual worry for the Hood’s targets.

But Dig is openly frowning in disgust as he describes, “A local slumlord of the Glades the D.A.’s office is about to let off for a fire in one of his buildings where the wiring wasn’t up to code.”

She’s about to ask if it’s possible Nickel might not have known, but then Barry surprises her by remarking, “Oh yeah, that guy’s way bad news. I don’t know how many times we’ve proved at the station his mismanagement has caused somebody’s death, but it always gets dismissed.” He scowls at the thought as he pulls on shoes and socks in order to walk over and join them.

“Just because it’s the Glades?” She can’t help checking, not wanting to believe it. But both men nod.

“The D.A. would rather ignore it than do anything,” Dig tells her.

“And the police can’t do anything,” Barry adds.

“So tonight we cross John Nickel’s name off the list,” Oliver concludes, having returned to the main room. He grabs up his bow and quiver. “You ok with that, Felicity?”

She hesitates for a moment, then nods.

Oliver looks gratified by her show of support and heads out. As soon as the door shuts behind him Barry drops boneless into the chair on her other side with a pained groan. She and Dig exchange amused glances.

“Not as fun as it looks, huh?” Dig asks. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.” He’s probably speaking from experience, until now having been Oliver’s sole human punching bag. Though Oliver had not really done much punching; more putting Barry in holds or knocking him to the floor, sometimes pinning him with a hand to his back for a moment to illustrate a point.
Barry’s head drops back on the chair and he stares at the ceiling. “I didn’t even think I was that out of shape…but I could barely get my breath!”

“Bet you’ll be sore tomorrow morning,” Felicity remarks, then freezes in her seat.

However Barry’s already replying with, “Yeah, I don’t think I’m gonna be able to walk—how do we keep doing that?”

“I don’t know!” Is her mortified answer.

Dig just shakes his head at both of them.

“Ok, I’m just—I’m gonna get changed,” Barry decides, easing himself up out of the chair and not looking at anyone. “Wash up a bit.”

“Alright,” Diggle responds for them both, waits for Barry to retreat before turning to her. “You know, Felicity, when you say something like that, it doesn’t have to mean anything else. Half the time nobody’s going to notice unless you call yourself on it.”

She nods. “I know.” She’s been trying long before this to cure her unfortunate habit of spouting accidental innuendo. Still, it’s kind of the man to give her advice. “I just feel like I have to apologize. And I don’t like people to think that I’m thinking it—”

“Yeah, but do you think it?” Dig suddenly interrupts, shooting her a searching look. When she raises an eyebrow, he gives a sharp nod to the mats Barry and Oliver had only recently been using.

Her face heats up. “Why would I—”

“I’m not saying you’re thinking that,” he dismisses hurriedly. “Just…the two of them.”

“What about the two of them?” She asks warily. It’s clear Dig’s been mulling this over in his head for quite some time, and his lips purse like he’s debating whether to say anything at all.

“Oliver’s very good at compartmentalizing,” he decides on finally. “I mean if you see him in here, with his family, his friends, a girl he likes—he’s like a different person each time.”

“Well if he went all Hood on a girlfriend, that’d get pretty weird,” she points out with a laugh. “Except of course now he’s sworn off girlfriends or entanglements or whatever he’s calling it.”

“No, but I’m saying that’s what he does with Barry. Not going Hood on him,” he dismisses when she’s about to open her mouth, “just that he doesn’t compartmentalize with Barry.”

“You mean like, since Barry’s on the team he should just be all stoic and such, but then he also tends to smile and maybe laugh at him a bit?” There was a shift, now that Felicity thinks on it, in how Oliver behaved towards her before and then after she was let in on his dual identity. She hasn’t minded it so much, because at least now she knows the truth and it feels closer to knowing the real Oliver.

But Diggle is right in that while Barry knows probably as much as her, Oliver still lightens up around the other man. Not like how he almost seems to dumb himself down in public or around his family, but just…like he genuinely wants to be a nice, normal person and not just a man who runs around the city at night with a bow and arrow hunting people.

She says at last, “Well, it’s really hard not to like Barry.” Because there’s not much of any other explanation for it.
“Uh-huh,” Dig says, looking at her with something of a knowing smile.

“Oh, No,” Felicity states firmly. Barry had already told her about the little mix-up with Oliver. She supposes it would make sense that Diggle would have gotten a similar idea too. “We’re not dating. I mean we like each other, but not like like, so we’ve decided we’re better as friends.” She’s honestly starting to consider Barry her best friend, which is something nice and new to have.

“Does Oliver know that?”

“So you two have been gossiping together,” she declares triumphantly. Before Dig can even try to defend herself she continues, “And he does, it came up when Barry was trying to make Oliver feel better about McKenna.”

“Well I think it worked,” he mutters.

Felicity turns her chair fully to face him. “John, what are you trying to tell me?”

Dig has that inner debate look going on again. “I don’t know yet,” he tells her, lowering his voice as footsteps announce Barry’s return. “Just keep an eye out, alright?”

She nods, though she’s not sure what in agreement to. But the com comes to life with Oliver’s voice. “Nickel’s gone.”

“Like out?” Barry leans over her shoulder to speak into the microphone. “That’s a first. Kind of awkward.” She puts a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

“No, he’s been taken, Barry,” Oliver replies, and though it’s clipped with irritation she thinks she hears a bit of amusement in the tone as well. That strange mix of the lighter and darker aspects of their hooded friend again. “Is Felicity there?”

“Yes, still here,” she takes her turn at the mic.

“I need you to start compiling a list of suspects. Former tenants, friends or family of victims, people who might have lost something in the fire.”

“That’s going to be a long list, Oliver,” Dig points out. “Slumlords aren’t exactly known for their popularity.”

“Have you touched anything?” Barry asks unexpectedly.

“What?” Is Oliver’s reply.

“His home, it’s basically a crime scene. I can case it, see if whoever beat you there left DNA evidence.” Barry’s already moving away to grab up his satchel and jacket. “What’s the address? I’ll meet you there.”

“No you won’t.” She can practically hear Oliver’s eye roll. “Dig, drive him.”

“Right. Come on, Barry,” the former army man pushes away from the computer station and stands.

“Why are any of us doing any of this?” She has to inquire. “Oliver, you were going over there to be all ‘grr, stop being bad or I’ll arrow you’—Barry, stop laughing!—anyway, now you want to rescue the guy?”

“I don’t like the idea of someone else being out there who won’t be showing my level of restraint,” Oliver answers her.
“Right, they shoot people with guns instead of arrowing them,” Barry snickers. Dig gives him a nudge up the steps but he’s shaking his head with a smirk.

Felicity, alone, gives a sigh and starts doing the research on that list in case there fails to be any evidence. Not much she can do to keep an eye out, as Dig has requested, from here.

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Oliver stands just inside Nickel’s home, waiting at the broken window for Barry and Dig to arrive. The latter is right that any number of people have motive to do this to the slumlord, but he’s counting on the former to narrow down that list considerably.

It’s easy enough to know when the other two arrive. He hears the car pull up and park, then footsteps as they come around to the makeshift entrance provided by Nickel’s abductor.

Barry’s first to the window, and Oliver shifts forward. He must have been shrouded by the shadows, because Barry gives a start. Then smiles. “Oh hey.”

Oliver blinks. It’s probably the oddest reaction he’s gotten from surprising someone as the Hood. But then again the younger man does know it’s him.

“I walked through to the living room and found signs of a struggle. Beyond that I haven’t touched anything,” he reports.

“Ok, cool,” is the response he gets. Then Barry shrugs out of the shoulder strap of his bag and sets it on the ground. Oliver exchanges a bewildered look with Dig before watching as the scientist bends over and starts rifling through its contents.

Dig clears his throat. “Thought the crime scene was inside.”

“Windowsill,” Barry says in explanation to the other man. He turns back in Oliver’s direction wearing gloves and holding a swab. “There’s smudges and a bit of dried blood. Could have been Nickels cut himself on the glass trying to grab onto something, or it could be our guy.” He collects a sample and bags it, then jumps back to his feet. “Now we can go inside.”

Barry’s swings one long leg easily up and over the windowsill, but Oliver takes his arm and places a hand between his shoulders to steady him as he clambers the other half of his body in. Dig follows after. The youngest of their group gets out a flashlight, shines it around on the floor.

“The carpet took up some of the dirt. Let’s see if you didn’t obscure the shoeprints.” He almost sounds like he’s talking to himself more than the two of them.

That doesn’t stop Oliver from responding. “Thank you for that.”

Barry pauses. “Oh, sorry. It’s ok, though, the cops do it all the time. And hey, you missed one!” His CSI on the job darts to where there is the distinct impression of shoe treads, a darker brown against the carpeting. Barry lays down flat on his stomach, braced on his forearms.

“Good job, Oliver,” Diggle remarks with clear humor, and Oliver turns away from Barry for a moment in order to send Dig a look.

Barry remains oblivious to the exchange happening above him. “Can somebody see if there’s any shoes left in Nickel’s closet? I need to check the size against this.”

“Sure,” it’s Dig who agrees, perhaps to make up for it, before heading towards the front of the home,
their best guess for where a closet might be.

Oliver approaches Barry from behind, observing him with interest as the other man seems to be collecting some of the dirt or whatever made the print. He hasn’t often gotten the chance to see him at work. The other man looks lost in his own world while he scrapes at the carpeting with a tool, mutters something or other about soil deposits. He ought to lecture Barry about leaving himself so open, but it’s only the two of them in this room, Dig in the front hall. So he continues to watch the younger man’s back and asks, “How do you know I didn’t make that?”

“It’s not your boot print,” is the absentminded response.

“You just know offhand what my boot print looks like?”

Barry seems to realize what he’s just let slip, and he stiffens. Then he rolls half onto his side and says to him, “Well I just sort of noticed what they looked like one time, and they’re custom, right? So they’re unique. It’s not that weird, is it?”

Oliver looks down at him stretched out on the floor, balancing on one arm now so he can remain turned towards him with a nervous sort of smile on his face.

“No,” he assures him, and it’s purely to watch that smile stretch out into a full one. He takes a couple steps closer, just as Dig reenters the room with the requested pair of shoes. Barry reaches out for one and then rolls back onto his front, looking between it and the print for barely a second.

“Yeah, different sizes, this is definitely our guy.” He looks about to push up off the ground when suddenly he goes still, tilts his head to peer under a couch. “Hang on, I think I see something.” It’s a couple feet away from him, but the scientist decides to simply army crawl over, then extends an arm. Long as Barry’s are, it looks like he’s having trouble reaching whatever object he’s spotted, because he shoves his arm in nearly up to the shoulder and starts wriggling his hips to gain even an extra inch or so.

There’s a strip of pale skin on display in the dim lighting getting wider and wider as his shirt and jacket ride up and the waistband of his jeans drags lower from friction against the floor. He gives a couple of little grunts, huffs of breath that Oliver picks up in the otherwise quiet room. They seem amplified to his ears, and his knuckles clench white around the bow in his hand with each successive one.

And the sensory recall takes him right back to earlier in the evening with Barry sprawled on his back in the foundry, white t-shirt sticking like a second skin and nearly translucent with sweat, taking gasping breaths as he stared up at Oliver.

Oliver only realizes he’s staring in the present when Diggle walks forward—blocking his view—and lifts the front end of the couch up with a single hand.

“Oh, right. Thanks, Dig,” Barry says with a bit of a laugh. Then he’s getting to his knees, one hand on the floor and the other clutched around a rock. “Looks like somebody threw this through the window to make it easier to smash the rest of the glass. This’ll be my best bet for getting fingerprints.” He bags the whole thing and gets to his feet. Does another little wiggle as he tugs the belt loops of his jeans that only Oliver watches. “I’m good to head back. Need to start running the analysis if it’s going to get you anything.”

“Right,” Oliver more hears himself agree than anything, voice gruff from a mouth that’s run dry.

Dig attempts to take advantage of his outwardly accepting mood, suggesting as they all walk back to
the window, “Why don’t we drop Barry off at the foundry, Oliver you get changed and I’ll take you back to the manor. Spend time with your family, man.”

“That’s when the work is done, Diggle,” he has the presence of mind to dispute. The last thing he needs right now is downtime in the manor with only these thoughts.

Dig’s not giving up yet. “Ok, then I’ll take you to dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m not asking.”

“How about you and Dig get dinner and bring back whatever leftovers you don’t eat?” Barry interjects up ahead as he leans out the window to rest his bag on the outside. Then he throws a look at Oliver over his shoulder. “If you’re not hungry anyway. I know I am. But it’ll pass the time that it’ll take for me to run the tests.”

He drags his eyes up to focus on Barry’s face. Swallows to get rid of that rasp in his voice. “Fine.” It’s occurring to him that going out with Dig at least for a little while will get him away from…this.

Back in the foundry he takes the opportunity while wiping away the greasepaint over his eyes to splash cold water over his whole face, which feels heated to the touch. His reflection stands tense with hands gripping the sides of the sink while he takes deep breaths in and out to slow a wildly beating heart, works to get his body back under control. These are not, to put it one way, reactions he’s unfamiliar with, but he’s trying in vain to figure out what’s causing him to respond this way to Barry of all people.

Once changed, Oliver purposely refuses to look the scientist’s way again as he follows Dig out to the car, lets the other man drive them out to Big Belly Burger. When their food is quick to arrive he’s glad to have something other to do than talk.

“How hungrier than I thought,” he tells Diggle with a shrug. The other man’s not eating and Oliver struggles not to roll his eyes. “You want to get the lecture over with now, Diggle, or later?”

Diggle, to his credit, doesn’t bother pretending. “You’ve been spending a lot of time under that hood lately, Oliver. When you’re not out doing that, you’re training. Now you’ll be training Barry.”

“I thought you were the one who said we need to teach him and Felicity the basics since they’re on the team,” he points out.

“You sure it’s not to help you, say, avoid entanglements?” There’s a dubious note to his friend’s voice, showing just what he thinks of the idea.

“Anyone I choose to let close to me ends up hurt,” he states plainly. “This is to keep those—such as my family—safe. And to protect anyone else.”

Dig looks away, frowning, and he’s mulling something over in his head. That always happens right before he’s about to say something Oliver doesn’t want to hear. “You know, I was starting to really worry about you. I get that things didn’t end well. With Helena, McKenna, Laurel. Sara. And whether it’s a good idea or not, I almost think you really could shut the rest of the world out.”

“I’m used to isolation,” he allows.

“Yeah, five years on that island and eight months later you’ve hardly left it.”
“Hardly?” He has to ask. And almost, the man had said. Why the qualifiers?

“Well, so far there’s been one person consistently not sticking to your plans or attitudes about how this mission’s being run,” Diggle states calmly. “And you consistently let him.”

He fixes the other man with an incredulous look. “Barry. You,” a sardonic edge creeps into his voice as he says, “you think that I, what, ‘leave the island’ for Barry?”

“I know you haven’t spent half as much time with anyone else since you’ve decided to not let anyone get too close,” the man observes. “Since McKenna left and he came back on the team.”

And Oliver’s about to return with some sort of response about necessity; Barry had been injured and they needed to make sure he was recovering; it was important to rebuild any trust that might have been broken in the argument. But the dichotomy that Dig has presented him with—McKenna’s departure and Barry’s return—suddenly makes everything clear.

He feels it’s the right thing to do, distancing himself from people in the wake of what happened to McKenna Hall. He’s certain Helena was motivated in a large degree by her knowledge that he’d been seeing the detective to deliver that shattering blow. As such, getting entangled—in a relationship, he allows in his head—is only dangerous for that possible other person. Intellectually, he knows this.

But Oliver also knows himself. Much as he strives for implacable composure and control, he is a man tempted by his passions. He craves the sort of connection he was trying to build with McKenna and is now consciously denying himself. Enough for his subconscious to turn to the closest available alternative, perhaps.

Closest because what Dig says is true, he has been spending more time with the scientist lately. Will be spending even more now that Barry’s arranged the time to come over to the foundry earlier for these training sessions. Sessions where his adrenaline is up, his blood is pumping, and he is grappling bodily with the younger man. And despite Oliver’s hitherto lack of interest in evaluating his male peers, it’s undeniable that Barry is a sort of warm, open, and eager that rests easy on the eyes. Objectively, he might have described him to an acquaintance as handsome. Long and lean with bright eyes and a smile that lit up even the dimness of the foundry. He’d be blind not to see any of that.

But, he decides, it’s the suddenness of McKenna’s absence and return of Barry’s constancy that’s caused him to notice it at all. Whether or not Dig thinks he’s losing his grip, at least now he knows he isn’t.

So, self-assured, he replies, “The life that I’m leading right now doesn’t leave much time for one with entanglements, family, or friends. Outside of the team, at any rate.”

Dig doesn’t look too impressed, or even flattered at the least, but their phones are both going off with text alerts and then Oliver’s getting a call from Felicity.

The next thing they know it’s too late to find John Nickel. The slumlord is dead, shot on a live video feed broadcast online to the residents of the Glades. And this break in the life of the Hood is over until his killer’s found.

Chapter End Notes
Basically, I'm stepping up the Barry/Oliver endgame, considering we're approaching the end of season one. Still not quite there yet, but things are in motion for this build to start gaining some momentum. I'd love to hear any and all thoughts, and thanks so much for reading!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Got a long one for you guys this time. So glad people are continuing to enjoy and thanks so much for all your encouraging responses!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Things, to put it bluntly, are pretty tense in the Cave. Felicity has so far been unable to track their abductor-turned-murderer’s wireless signal, and Barry ran the DNA sample he was able to recover against the police’s database with no luck, so he’s currently trying a wider search of all city-owned databases. Dig is on the phone with a well-connected friend and Oliver has been left to pace and gripe. Barry doubts the man sees it that way though, and if they didn’t have an unhinged killer on the loose he might have made a comment.

Right now, the target of their vigilante friend’s impatience is Felicity. “Use that air magnet thing, you said it could—”

“Oliver! No offense, but do I tell you how to clean your arrows?” She snaps, the sheer frustration in her tone surprising both of them. “Or prowl around Barry’s work station like a caged animal?”

Barry turns in his chair with a bewildered look to find Oliver already taking a large step back, though it still only puts him about three feet away. He’d been closer than Barry thought.

But then his computer beeps and Barry swivels back around the same time as Oliver lunges forward, a hand missing the back of Barry’s chair to instead land on his shoulder. He just barely avoids jumping, which is good because he’ll bash his head on the underside of Oliver’s jaw now if he does.

“What is he?”

“Uh, Joseph Falk. Former city worker, a computer technician with the Department of Transportation. He quit his job last year for ‘personal reasons’ after…” Barry’s doing a quick search in another browser. “After his wife, Emma, was killed in a possible homicide.”

“Possible?”

“It didn’t go to trial,” Barry explains.

“That matches up with what my buddy in the NSA got me,” Diggle, off the phone, rejoins the group. Barry feels Oliver’s hand tighten for just a second—so short in fact, it’s probably just a twitch—before he lets go, turns to face the other man. “Falk went off the grid after his wife’s death and the NSA’s only known him since as ‘the Savior’, a cyber-crusader that attacks fringe sites using the website code Felicity was able to get.”

“So what is he crusading for?” Oliver muses aloud.

But just then, one of the browsers Felicity has up, the link to Falk’s video feed, goes live. “We’re back,” the man’s altered voice filters through, but the camera is on a bloodied, battered, but familiar looking man.
“Oh my God, that’s the A.D.A.,” Barry breathes.

“I have with me assistant district attorney Gavin Carnahan,” Falk announces in confirmation. He starts going on about Carnahan’s perceived crimes, making it far more personal than the previous video, and anyone with average search skills is probably able to figure out who this guy is now.

Felicity, however, has far greater than average. “I got him! Can’t shut him down, but he’s working off an IPX located at 23rd and Mira.”

“You want to Hood up?” Dig asks, but the other man surprises them by darting a look between his gear and the door, a deep frown marring his features.

“It’s the middle of the day—” Oliver begins.

“What are you, Dracula?” Barry can’t help but exclaim. Oliver gapes at him, incredulous. “Just go!” A moment later, the other man is making leaps and bounds up the stairs, the door slamming behind him. Of course as soon as that’s happened, Barry becomes the uncertain one. “Actually, that was probably a terrible idea right? I mean, he’s Oliver Queen, anyone could recognize him!” It’s amazing so few have even when he’s suited up, really, with the poor identity concealers of a Hood and some face paint to work with. Not for the first time since he’s rejoined the team his eyes go to a little white box sitting on one of the tables. The box he gave to Felicity to give to Oliver who apparently gave it to the table. Where it is starting to collect dust.

But that’s not going to help Oliver when he’s in otherwise regular clothes anyway, so he puts it out of his mind again, turning to go for the steps.

But Diggle places a hand on his shoulder, tugs him to a stop with a grip both not as tight yet not as gentle as Oliver’s. “He’s already long gone, Barry.”

“Guys,” Felicity says, clearly intent on watching the video feed without distractions. She’s sitting ramrod straight in her chair, eyes wide, and very pale.

They move to her, one on either side. “He’ll get there, Felicity. Oliver’ll stop it,” he tells her softly, not wanting to disturb but not so sure he wants to only listen to Carnahan’s sobbing and pleading for the next few minutes. It makes his gut twist unpleasantly, just sitting here while that’s going on. Shouldn’t it be the natural human impulse to do something?

And when Oliver’s voice comes through saying, “Can’t find him! He’s not here, Felicity!”

“What?” The woman almost screeches, pulling up the work she’d done on her computer.

“I searched every office on every floor! He’s not here—”

“It’s pitch black wherever they are, aside from the light he’s using,” Barry reasons hurriedly, “is there a basement?”

“There’s nothing below the building!”

“He has to be underground, Oliver!”

“Oh crap, no,” Felicity is saying, fingers flying over the keyboard. “What? How is this possible? This can’t happen!”

“Talk to me, Felicity!”
“She’s running the search again,” Barry tells him.

“I need—”

“Wait.” Felicity waves a hand as if to cut them both off, though Oliver can’t even see it. “He moved. Just north of you. Ocean and Grand.”

“Oh my way!”

Carnahan’s been reduced to begging, and it’s reaching the end of the ten minutes Falk’s allotted him. “Gavin Carnahan, I find you guilty of crimes against the Glades.”

“Don’t do this, don’t do this!”

A gun is raised into the frame. “And I sentence you to death.”

“I’m at Ocean and Grand,” Oliver’s voice, laced with frustration. “That’s just a vacant lot.”

“What?” Barry almost yelps, stunned. Their blonde IT expert is wrong twice?

“How is this possible?” Felicity is practically being undone with panic and pressure. “This can’t happen, he—”

“Find the right address, now!” Is the harsh growl hurled over the line to her, and she rears back like it’s been a physical blow.

“She’s doing her best, Oliver, you can’t just—” Barry protests, indignant at the treatment of their friend.

“Both of you just stop!” Felicity cries. Then there’s the sound of a gunshot on the video feed and he and Felicity both jump, their eyes glued to the screen as Carnahan slumps lifeless and the image cuts to black.

“Oliver,” Dig’s taken possession of the microphone. “It’s over. Carnahan’s dead.”

The vigilante’s only response is to shut off his com. There’s a heavy silence in the room itself for a long moment.

“Felicity,” Barry tries, reaches out but doesn’t quite touch down on her shoulder before she’s speaking.

“Oliver was going to stop it. He would’ve, if I hadn’t— if—I can’t,” she draws in a shuddering breath. Then very calmly, “I need you both to leave me alone.”

“Are you sure?” Diggle asks, exchanging a brief worried glance with him.

“Leave!” Comes the shouted demand. They both take a couple steps back, exchange another look. Barry follows Dig to the stairs, but that’s about as far as he can get before he looks back at Felicity staring despondently at her screen. So when Dig looks back at him questioningly before heading out, he just shakes his head, turns, and takes a seat right on the bottom step.

She looks back after a couple minutes, eyes widening then narrowing when she spots him. “Barry, I said—”

“I know,” he calls back. “And this is me, leaving you alone. But I’m also here if that’s not what you really want.” He’s had more than enough of those moments in his life to recognize it. So he’s not too
hurt either when she turns away sharply.

The door opens again, and he looks up to see it’s Oliver, who pauses and takes in him on the steps, Felicity at her computer. Then the older man walks down until it’s comfortable to lean in and ask softly, far softer, calmer, than he would’ve thought he’d be upon returning, “Where’s Diggle?”

“She asked us to leave her alone,” Barry responds.

“In my loud voice,” Felicity adds, cuts a look over her shoulder at him. “Which apparently isn’t loud enough.”

Barry looks up at Oliver, shrugs his shoulders. The other man pats his back, hand sliding away as he straightens back up and walks over to her. “This wasn’t your fault.”

“I was the one who was supposed to find Carnahan,” Felicity insists with a sad shake of her head, “and I was the one who sent you that bogus location.” Her gaze returns to the screen again. “I’ve never seen anybody die.”

“Hey,” Oliver says, waits for her to look back up at him. “This is the thing with what we do. Sometimes we lose.”

But she still sounds dejected when she states, “Maybe it is better being alone like you’re doing. I’m not seeing anyone currently, but if I were, I don’t know how I’d tell him about today.” Oliver looks taken aback by his latest lifestyle decision being cited by the normally cheerful woman and his eyes meet Barry’s, seemingly conflicted on what to say.

Felicity takes that out of his hands, however, as she stands and gathers up her purse and coat. “Think I’ll go out and get a coffee. I need something before I can,” she waves a hand back at the various monitors.

“Of course,” Oliver tells her, watches her go. When Felicity reaches Barry on the steps, she offers an apologetic smile which he waves off. It’s only after she’s out the door herself that he stands up, makes his way over to the computers. “Think I’ll get started so she’s got something to dive into when she gets back,” he tells Oliver. “There’s some sort of sound in the ambient noise of both his videos. We figure out what that is, we’ll be able to narrow down where he is.”

Oliver nods. Then, still in that softer mode, unexpectedly asks, “How’re you holding up?”

Barry, who was about to drop into Felicity’s vacated chair, stops. “Well, I work homicides pretty often,” he reminds the other man. Then he does sit with a resigned sigh and his eyes choosing to examine his shoes. “And I saw my first one when I was eleven, so…”

He watches out of his periphery how Oliver’s eyes first widen in shock, then his mouth falls open. “You were there,” the realization is breathed across the empty space between them.

There’s something bitter in the amused smirk that plays across his face. “Yeah, it was the middle of the night in my house, where else was I supposed to be? You must’ve had an interesting childhood.”

Oliver chooses to ignore that, instead pressing, “If you saw it then why is everyone so convinced it was your father?”

Barry grimaces. He was never ashamed to tell the story as a kid far and wide, trying, searching in vain for somebody to believe him. As an adult he’s gotten more careful. What’s the point when he knows someone’s more likely to think him crazy for it than not? And he thinks Oliver might just find him crazy, and the thought of that happening is something that makes Barry’s heart constrict in his
chest and his throat close up and he just shakes his head.

“Barry, hey,” Oliver’s voice brings him back into focus. The man is holding his shoulders, looking down at him with an amount of concern he thinks unwarranted for the situation. He just got a little lost in his own mind, after all.

“Sorry,” he says, gives another little shake of the head, dredges up a brief smile, all lip and no teeth. “I guess, uh, because it’s kind of hard to prove, like with this.” He gestures at the search result ‘Ocean and Grand’ still displayed on Felicity’s screen. “Falk can’t have worked off two different IPX’s without moving, but he was definitely staying in the exact same room with Carnahan. So how’d he get that to happen? I used to research stuff like this in my spare time, random cases with unexplainable evidence or results or anything, cause of my mom’s case.”

“Used to?” Oliver asks, then a moment later, “Before this.”

“Yeah,” Barry admits. He has a manila file filled to the brim with reports and newspaper articles and online journals back in his apartment. Doesn’t really have the proper space to devote to it like he wants. Nor the time, anymore. “But, you know, before this I didn’t really have anyone to tell about my day. So there’s trade-offs with anything.” He smiles for real this time and the other man’s lips curve slightly at the corners in response, though he still doesn’t look happy about something. Then Barry gives a start—Oliver’s hands clamping down tight on his shoulders—and quickly amends, “But I’m not seeing anyone.”

“What?” Now the older man looks perplexed.

“I mean, I was just- you and Felicity were talking about seeing people, and I’m not, since you asked before when you thought I was. I just meant that now I feel like I have people I can talk to about my day.”

“Right,” Oliver says after a moment, and though he shakes his head he doesn’t seem annoyed.

“Like you,” Barry feels like he has to add, because ‘people’ makes it sound impersonal and that’s not what he’d meant either. Although Oliver might not want it to be personal—yeah, of course he doesn’t, he’s trying to avoid entanglements after getting dumped by girlfriend and best friend, it’s not like he’s here offering even if he did ask—so he snaps his mouth shut and swivels the chair back to face the computer, dislodging Oliver’s hands in the process.

He doesn’t think they were there that long, but his shoulders where they were held feel strangely warmer than the rest of him. Oliver must run at a higher temperature than him, heat transference.

“Anyway, got to actually start if I’m going to have anything for Felicity. Or you. You probably want results.” What if he’s just been running his mouth this whole time while Oliver’s been getting steadily more and more irritated? Is he going to start the prowling thing again?

But Oliver simply leans one hip and a hand on the table, watches as Barry works. Felicity and Dig both come back in together, and he wonders if the former army man treated her to coffee. Probably a smart move. Felicity shows him even more advanced sound analysis programs than the one Kelton uses back at the precinct. The sound becomes cleaner, clearer. Over and over again, never changing rhythm. Barry thinks of the trains he takes to get from Starling to Central and back. Tries not to think about the fact that the Savior’s back online, with a man that looks even younger than him.

But it’s Dig who comes through for them, not with new tech, but with old knowledge. “When I was a kid, my dad used to take me to the Rockets game. By subway. For fourteen minutes I’d lean against the window, feeling the rhythm of the train moving. That’s how he did it. He was at 23rd and
Mira—"
“—but underground!” Barry can’t help jumping on the end excitedly, thrilled he was right and Oliver knows it based on the sharp look he throws him even as he’s grabbing up his gear to change.

“Where is he now?”

“On the Old Cross Town line,” Felicity’s pulled up a map of the whole system and adds, “in fifteen minutes, he’ll be at Spring Street stop.”

Oliver is changed in three, only bothering with the suit and not the greasepaint and he’s going to fight a man with a video camera in very close quarters and Barry’s eyes dart to the box again and this is so stupid. “Oliver, wait!”

He’s on the third step but still jerks to a stop. “What?”

And Barry, idiot that he is, scrambles over and basically throws it at him. Oliver still catches it, looking absurdly confused as he finally opens the lid.

“Instead of the greasepaint,” he blurs. “Um, it’s better and faster and less messy and there’s a lot of other things I could say but you don’t want to hear them right now.”

Oliver lifts the green mask out, pushes back his hood and slips it over his head to rest in place, touches a hand to the material for a second with a contemplative look to his features, before tugging the Hood back in place. “Later,” he promises, then heads up the steps. Barry stands there a moment longer than it takes for the door to shut behind him.

Oh. Maybe he is offering.

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Tommy stands on the main floor of a club with his arms wrapped around a young woman. It’s a scene he’s revisited many, many times over the years, but there are several key differences. See, the club’s not quite open for one. And it’s his club, or the one he manages for the brother of said young woman who is currently sobbing into his arms while they’re both watching one of the club’s valets being threatened by a lunatic with a gun on live television.

“Tommy, where’s- where’s Ollie?” Thea asks him, voice wavering and eyes wide and horrified. Scared for the young man, Roy, on the screen. Apparently they’re kind of serious.

And Ollie. The brother. He might’ve once said best friend, but he doesn’t really want to admit to association with the man this ‘Savior’ is clearly emulating, even in his head. But he fakes a tight smile for Thea, tells her. “Not sure, Speedy. I can check for him in the back if you want.” When she nods, he sighs, guides her over to one of the barstools. “Just sit tight, ok?”

Then he goes to the door. That stupid, stupid back door that he never questioned, not even once, the whole time he was helping develop the Verdant and he feels like a fool. Slams the door behind him as he pounds down those steps. “Oliver?”

Three people look up at him in surprise, only one he recognizes. But it’s Mr. Diggle, or Dig, Oliver’s bodyguard and cohort. The other man and woman, he’s never seen before.

Diggle takes a couple steps forward, official spokesperson it seems. “He’s out. Something you needed?”
“His sister needs him, actually,” Tommy snaps. Of course Oliver’s out, on some new mission for this mad crusade he both wishes he never found out about but is sickened by the fact he’d been so long in the dark. He catches sight of that same footage being played in the Verdant upstairs and points to it. “That’s her boyfriend.”

The bodyguard raises his eyebrows but just says, “He’s working on it.”

“Great,” Tommy replies, heavily sardonic, “so killing the bad guy’s more important than comforting his own sister?” Diggle says nothing, the woman averts her gaze to the floor.

But it’s the younger man who looks at him critically from his seat next to her and asks, “Well which would his sister prefer, someone there to help her mourn or her boyfriend back? Cause that’s what Oliver’s going to do.”

A harsh bark of laughter escapes him as he looks around at them all, their little base. “I can’t believe this. You know, Oliver at least has an excuse. Whatever the hell happened to him on that island, well, maybe I was kidding myself thinking he wouldn’t be messed up. But you people? You’re, what, helping him? Encouraging him to do things like this guy?” He waves a hand in demonstration at the screen, but it’s gone black. Whatever. “I guess that makes you even more insane!”

The other man’s hand slaps the table as he shoots up to his feet, a scowl on his face just as nasty as the smile Tommy’s wearing. “Barry—” The woman says, an anxious warning, and reaches for his arm.

But ‘Barry’ steps out of her range, starts marching right up to him. “Ok, I don’t care what you think about me, or what I do, or why I do it, alright? But Oliver is not insane. He’s different, and I’m sorry if you didn’t get Ollie back like you wanted,” the way the nickname rolls off his tongue sounds like something he’s revolted by. “But that was never going to happen. You don’t know anything about what he went through, none of us do, and until recently you didn’t really care, did you Tommy? You just wanted to pretend like nothing had changed.”

He almost falters a step back—skinny as he is the guy’s the sort of tall that makes him have to crane his neck to keep eye contact—but manages to hold his ground. “So I’m supposed to be happy with what he is now? A killer?”

“What he is? What?” The younger man stresses, outraged. “That’s all you see him as? He’s saved you from kidnappers, he’s saved your father, he’s stood aside and supported you while you date the girl he was in love with—cause you’re his best friend! Five years didn’t change the fact he came home ready to love and protect you like a brother the best way he knew how. And he’s not going to stop doing what’s right. So you can be mad at him for not telling you, you can disagree with how he does things—but you do not get to put up a wall and say he’s a thing. Not if you ever want to see him be better than you say, not if you care.” The younger man’s breathing harshly, even as the anger seems to seep out of him while Tommy just continues to stare. It’s like he shrinks, ducking his head and taking a quiet “Mr. Merlyn,” on the end as if either of them have been acting respectful this whole time.

He’s speechless, completely, can’t even seem to think let alone say something. He has no idea what his expression is like. Tommy staggers back finally, turns and starts walking to the door that will take him out behind the club.

“Mr. Merlyn—”

“Barry, come on,” Diggle mutters to the younger man.
But he still calls after Tommy, “Please, Mr. Merlyn, he needs you to care.”

The early evening air is cool on his face, and he needs it. Tommy leans back against the wall, tilts his head back.

Yeah, he wanted Ollie back. Ollie was his best friend he’d grown up with, knew better than himself sometimes. He’d nearly gotten himself killed in Hong Kong once trying to get Ollie back. He cared about Ollie. It wouldn’t have mattered if he’d been a little different. Tommy’s different from what they both were back then. But this Oliver who’s come back, is he someone he can care for?

He’s not alone for long. The tall, broad form of the Hood emerges, though he has a feeling he’s been there for longer. Probably just decided he couldn’t wait any more for Tommy to stop blocking his way in.

“Hey,” it’s said softly, unsure, as Oliver lifts back the hood and takes off an honest-to-God mask. Makes him look less crazed than the eye shadow or whatever it was. But he doesn’t seem crazed or even all that menacing, standing there with the bow and all just hanging limply at his side. He thinks he might be on a very short list of people who’ve seen the Hood be awkward.

“Hey,” Tommy finally says. “The kid ok?” A nod. “You’re going to want to do a quick change, then, cause you just rescued your sister’s boyfriend and he’ll probably be coming right here.” Oliver blinks, bewildered, clearly hasn’t known. “What about ‘the Savior’?” Silence and a blank expression. Tommy’s eyes close, he nods once to himself, and pushes off the wall.

“You said you wanted to explain everything to me, a few weeks ago,” he says, then nods his head back to the door. “Your buddy Barry in there just went to bat for you. Really let me have it.” Now Oliver’s eyes widen. He looks surprised and a little nervous, waiting on what Tommy will say next. “Said you were doing this for me.”

“For you,” is the agreement. “For my father, for the city.”

“For you,” Tommy states with a nod. “Well, I can’t speak for the city, but I’d rather not have a best friend who kills for me. Your friend also said you were better than that.” The other man doesn’t reply, so Tommy takes two steps up to him. “You’re gonna have to start proving him right, Oliver.”

He turns and walks away to his car before he can see whatever expression crosses the other’s face. He’s not sure he wants to know. Not sure he knows anything anymore.

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The club itself hasn’t yet started to fill when Oliver takes Tommy’s advice and puts in an appearance. He knocks on the door of the women’s bathroom, calls Thea’s name. His sister pokes her head out with half her smudged mascara wiped away and eyes that are still a bit teary.

“Hey. I’m sorry I wasn’t—” But she launches herself at him in a grateful hug anyway.

“I’m just so glad Roy’s ok. The Hood saved him, can you believe that?” Between this and the disastrous incident with his mother, Thea must be having a hard time reconciling her thoughts on his alter ego. But she quickly excuses herself to finish freshening up.
Not really wanting to witness what’ll happen after that, Oliver makes for the door at the back of the Verdant, only for a familiar voice waiting at the bar to call out to him. “Ollie?”

Laurel. He pauses, puts a smile on his face as he turns to her. “Hi. You, uh, you just missed Tommy.”

“Oh,” Laurel says, but makes no move to go, eyes downcast but occasionally flicking back up to meet his. Oliver fiercely debates for a moment. Anything between him and Laurel, even just a simple talk, is almost by definition entanglement. Yet today, if anything, seems to have been about proving him wrong about avoiding those. Felicity’s uncharacteristic bleak agreement in the face of her perceived failure; the disturbing reflection of himself in the lonely, vengeful Savior; Tommy’s surprising challenge making him wonder if perhaps there isn’t a little bit of hope left; Barry smiling up at him as he told Oliver has was his someone to talk to.

He’d always wanted Laurel. Before Helena, before McKenna. Before Barry.

So he lays his palms flat on the bar top and asks, “You alright? You seem like you’re something other than alright.”

He almost instantly regrets it. Laurel’s mother has apparently been to town and gone, chasing an imaginary trail to Sara. His rare optimistic mood, and heart, drops like a lead stone even as he forces himself to nod and comment where he’s supposed to. He knows the Lances won’t find their other daughter no matter how determinedly they search, though he’s hardly told Laurel why. He doubts he ever will.

But she seems to have gotten the closure she needs from coming to him about it as she draws in a deep breath. “Thanks for listening,” Laurel gives him a warm smile, one he hasn’t seen from her in a long time, and it lifts his spirits if only a little. She’s told him as a friend about her day even if he can’t tell her about his. Maybe that could be enough?

“So course.” He’s about to say more, suggest that this doesn’t have to be just the once, but then he hears faintly the door of the foundry open. So he lets Laurel gather up her purse and walk away with a “Good night,” that isn’t too hurried. Then he walks back to meet Barry of all people right before the younger man can walk out into the club. He’s not risking Laurel turning back and catching sight of them together.

“Oh hey,” Barry gives him a warm smile, one he sees from him practically every day, and he thinks he’s mostly found that better mood again. “Just wanted to let you know I was going to head over to the precinct, since I kind of didn’t put my hours in today yet. Unless you need me for anything else.”

“No. No, I think you’ve done quite enough tonight,” he replies, gets them moving back toward the foundry.

Barry tenses under the guiding hand he’s placed on his back. “You heard about Tommy.”

“From Tommy, actually,” he tells him. Stops them just before the door. “Why, Barry?”

He shrugs. “He’s your best friend, and he knows now. So if you can’t have a someone-someone to talk to about all this, you should at least have a friend-someone.”

Oliver has to shake his head. As bright—in intellect and personality—as Barry can be, sometimes he completely misses things. Though that’ll probably be working in his favor however long this fixation of letting his eyes or hands linger and being just a little bit in his space lasts. Aware as he himself is of it, that should be the end of things, but it's never been that easy for him. If what's just transpired
with Laurel is any indication, once he starts it's far harder to stop. And that can get dangerous.

“I’d be happy to have Tommy consider me one again,” is all he admits, “but I already have a few of those. Three to be specific.” Barry’s grin in response ought to be officially declared infectious. As it is, Oliver just keeps his answering smile a small quirk of the lips, gone as he pulls open the door of the foundry. They head in together to get Dig so Barry can leave, though as Oliver’s eyes sweep over his hastily discarded gear he can’t help asking, “So what exactly did you have me put on my face before I left and where did you get it?”

Barry ends up leaving a lot later than he’d probably planned.

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It’s nights like these where it gets hard for Quentin to ignore the call of the bar. Dinah’s gone, again, and only just when they’d been getting comfortable with each other, started to hope again. He should’ve known it couldn’t last, that it’d be all for nothing. The terrible secret she’s been carrying with her these five years—that she’d known all along Sara’s plans to board the *Gambit*—has left him shaken as well. He can’t imagine how Laurel’s holding up.

Right now, though, he needs this. The solidity of his desk, a stack of files set before him, and the desk lamp to read them by. The squad room’s almost entirely cleared out except for the night shift. He squints down at a page. The vic had some drug in their system and whoever’s written the report has only given the compound name with all its tri-this and di-that, which tells him squat. What the hell do they think the street names are for?

So he trudges up to the labs looking for anybody at this sort of hour, and is surprised to find Allen. The kid’s been doing morning shifts lately, from what he recalls, but now he’s here checking between a file and a readout at his computer, rubbing at tired eyes before frowning at the two again.

“What are doing here this late, Allen?” It comes out gruffer than he thinks he means. Not Allen’s fault Quentin can’t decide if he can stand the sight of kids his age anymore.

The forensics assistant jumps, turning sharply to face him. “Uh, Detective Lance! Just had some stuff to catch up on.”

“Uh-huh,” he says, unconvinced, and takes two steps up to the kid’s desk. His eyes drop down to the file. “Pretty sure you weren’t on the Merlyn assassination attempt.”

Allen’s eyes are wide, and he thinks he sees him starting to sweat. Then again the kid gets overanxious about anything from his tardiness to if he got the orders for the Techs’ coffee run right. “Oh. Well I- I had to sort through some recent stuff and I couldn’t help noticing an inconsistency.” He raises an eyebrow, a silent request to go on. Allen draws in a breath, then steps aside to let him see the pages he’s referencing specifically. “Ok, so there were a few Triad members who were killed in the attempt—”

“By the Hood,” he growls.

Allen’s shaking his head. “Only two weren’t shot by arrows. Two of them were found in a stairwell shot with one of the handguns they were carrying. Aside from their prints, I got a partial, but it’s not matching…” the kid trails off. Almost like there’s something more.

“Not matching who?” Quentin presses, suddenly sharp and alert despite the late hour.

All Allen says in reply, however, is, “Nobody. I mean, no one in our database.”
He scowls. Still, though, it’s something. Something nobody else had noticed. “And you got all that just from reading the file?”

The kid shrugs. “It didn’t fit in the timeline or with the Hood’s methods, so it kind of stuck out. I was hoping to get it cleared up, but I guess it doesn’t matter since to the rest of the case with the confession they got and all.”

Yeah, upstanding one-percenter Kevin Chen, who would’ve thought? And of course the supposed hirer of the Triad’s gone missing this very night. All damning enough in the eyes of the law.

“Well maybe you can clear this up for me,” he says at last, shoving his own file under the kid’s nose and pointing to the long string of prefixes and element names that he’d been having so much trouble with. “Give that to me in plain English.”

“Ok,” Allen says, scans the text with his eyes, scrubs a hand over his face. “Well it’s some kind of narcotic. A lot of similarities to Vertigo, actually…but not exactly the same. It’d probably have a similar effect though, might be an attempted reproduction.”

“Vertigo again, just what we need,” he grumbles, takes the file back. “Well, thanks.”

Allen blinks at him in surprise. “You’re welcome, detective.”

He’s never really worked with the kid before, was maybe a bit quick to dismiss the fresh-faced newcomer from Central City when he first came on the force. He’s just proved as competent, if not more so than most of the staff he’s worked with in the past.

Quentin stops by the door. “You know something, Allen? Before Hall went on leave she recommended you. To the taskforce.” The kid looks up at him sharply, as if he can’t believe what’s being said. He allows the briefest of tight smiles, nods to the Merlyn file still spread out on the desk. “Might just have to consider it.” He walks out.

Finding his little girl and bringing her home might be something beyond his control. But he’s going to use every last resource available to find and bring in that vigilante.

Chapter End Notes

Oh boy! I had some fun with perspectives I’ve never used before in this chapter. I know some people wanted to see Tommy in the story, so we got some of that this time. I know it was mostly to argue…but it’s better for Tommy to air those grievances now rather than later. All I’m saying on that. And Detective Lance is getting ready to tackle both Vertigo and the Hood, and he just might be dragging Barry along with him! And what might come of the inconsistencies of the assassination case? Lot of material in this chapter, bit less of the Barry/Oliver but unfortunately the plot must go on. Hoping to have more for you soon!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

So thrilled to see people enjoying the story so much! Wanted to get this out sooner rather than later, so here's the next installment. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well this isn’t going to make things complicated or anything.” It’s Felicity who says it, but otherwise there’s an almost oppressive silence from the room’s other occupants.

Barry sits at the edge of the mat furthest from the computers, but he’s not here for training today. He’s turned away from them all, knees drawn up and his elbows braced on them, hands in his hair. There’s a tension in his shoulders from this hunched-over position, but he needs the illusion of protection, something to hang onto. He lifts his head briefly, still doesn’t quite look back. “I mean Detective Lance only said he was considering it, I haven’t been officially assigned. I could, I don’t know, really screw up some lab results or show up late for a week, get him really mad—”

“Absolutely not,” Oliver finally speaks up. He hears him pad across the mat—he’s interrupted salmon ladder day for this unfortunate announcement, a true crime if there ever was one—as he continues, “I do not want you purposefully sabotaging your own career like that for me. You’re a good CSI, Barry—”

“Cause you’ve met so many to judge from,” he can’t help muttering, if only to shoot down the warm feelings of pride and elation rising in him. He shouldn’t be getting compliments at a time like this.

“I’ve seen you work,” is Oliver’s counter. He’s just a couple feet behind and to the side of Barry now, and he can feel the older man’s stare on his profile, willing him to turn and look. “And people like Lance should have realized your talent a long time ago.”

“Could work out for us, having an inside man,” Dig points out.

“Well, we don’t want to accidentally show our hand,” Oliver disputes. He takes another step, places a firm hand on Barry’s shoulder even as he’s talking to Diggle. “Lance clearly doesn’t suspect anyone at the crime lab, at the least not Barry. But he’ll be under a closer watch now.” There’s a brief squeeze on his shoulder, but he doesn’t think it’s to prompt him to look or anything so he lets his eyes slip shut instead as Oliver keeps speaking.

The man behind the vigilante Lance wants his help tracking down is remaining remarkably calm about all this, which was about one of the two options Barry had been expecting when he’d come here to let them all know about his possible reassignment. It’s the option he was definitely hoping for. Oliver’s anger, though being directed towards his team less and less frequently, is not something he ever likes to experience.

If this is all just a façade he’s using to hide any panic, however, that’s also not great. Barry has to wonder if the way the older man’s hand seems to keep tightening and then easing around his shoulder is some unconscious expression of nerves. Whether that makes him Oliver’s stress ball or not, he can’t really object too much when it’s simultaneously soothing his own tension. Barry’s head drops forward and tilts to the side to silently offer up the knot in the juncture of his neck and
shoulder, and he feels the brush of a callused thumb just over the collar of his shirt. It’s good. Really

good.

“…Barry? Barry.”

“Mm-hm?”

“I said will that work for you?” Oliver apparently repeats, and his head shoots back up in the sudden
realization that he’s completely missed everything that was said in the last several minutes.

“Uh…” He considers just agreeing for the sake of not seeming like too much of an idiot, but then
again that will probably backfire later when he doesn’t know to do the thing that may or may not
work for him and he’ll seem like even more of an idiot. “Sorry, will what work for me?” He turns his
head to let his eyes pass the other man up, hoping to avoid the frustration or disappointment that’s
bound to be there.

Instead he sees Felicity looking with wide eyes over the top of her screen and Dig observing with his
arms crossed, a single eyebrow raised. Something in their expressions makes his face heat up, and he
ends up refocusing on Oliver anyway to avoid that

now. The older man’s wearing this look that is
torn between amusement and concern at his absolute lack of awareness, but still reiterates, “If Lance
has you assigned, accept the position. Do what you can to misdirect them, but try not to funnel too
much information to me that only the taskforce would know. If it looks like I’m anticipating their
every move, it’ll get suspicious. Just tell me if it’s something you feel will complicate the mission.
Will that work for you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, but you’re sure—”

“Yes, I am. I trust you, Barry.” That warmth from before can’t be suppressed now, and he feels a
smile spread across his face for the first time since Lance had come up to talk to him the previous
night. Oliver shares it to a smaller degree, genuine he can tell by the softness of it and the light in his
eyes. He thinks, it’s a shame not many outside the Cave get to see it. Oliver squeezes his shoulder
once more, then straightens up. “Did you still want to train?”

“Uh, yeah,” he replies, quickly getting to his feet and going for his bag for the t-shirt and sweats he’s
packed. Tries not to bring a hand up to his other shoulder, which feels still a little stiff and neglected.
Felicity’s gone back to typing on the computers but he can still feel Diggle’s eyes on him. He’s not
sure what, if anything, the former army man might say, but Barry remembers there was something
else he wanted to discuss with him anyway. “Hey Dig, I just finished going over the Merlyn
assassination attempt.”

When he looks, Diggle has shifted his weight and there’s a new light of interest in his eyes. “Did the
police files have anything on Deadshot?”

“Not any more than we know,” he has to tell him with a grimace, watches the frustration crease the
man’s forehead. “But, a member of the Triad was arrested recently and confessed that they’d
contracted him with money leading back to a Kevin Chen.”

“Kevin Chen?” It’s Oliver who asks sharply, stopping the exercise he was conducting with a
bamboo rod while waiting for Barry.

“Yeah, why? You know him?” It wouldn’t surprise Barry, considering they’re both part of Starling’s
elite.

“Not well,” Oliver says. There’s a contemplative look to him as he clarifies, “He was an associate of
my father’s.”

“So you wouldn’t know where he likes to hang out? Cause he’s kind of wanted for questioning and probably arrest.”

“Chen’s daughter is currently vacationing in London,” Felicity pipes up, already three steps ahead of them on her computer.

“Could be he’s followed her there,” Diggle reasons, “which means we’ve got nothing until they can get him back here.” His one hand curls into a fist at this discouraging conclusion.

“It shouldn’t take long for them to find him if he has, John,” Oliver offers.

“Too bad Chen wasn’t on your list,” the other man remarks, half bitter and it’s a truly jarring emotion to see from Dig. “Maybe we already would’ve made a run at him. Known more about his ties with the Triad.”

There’s nothing any of them can say to that, so Barry tries a different angle asking Oliver, “Speaking of the Triad, did you coordinate with some of Merlyn’s security that night? There’s an unaccounted for shooter, took out two of their guys.” It’s probably a lot to ask for, considering it was a few weeks back now, but that’s how police work is; slow, methodical.

And, well, while he hasn’t really done a lot of talking about cases with the team…Oliver’s called him a good CSI. He kind of wants to revel in that a little.

There’s no easy answer that’ll wrap things up nicely, however, as Oliver states, “There were the Triad members and the police with guns. If nobody’s come forward from the force yet, I really couldn’t tell you.” He looks troubled by it, like he’s retrospectively berating himself for not noticing the mystery guy.

“Ok, that’s cool, I’ll just keep looking into it,” Barry says, then actually grabs up his change of clothes. “Give me a minute.”

Felicity shakes her head even as her eyes are glued to the monitor. “After the first time I don’t know why you’re going back for more—training! More training!” She adds on, looking between the both of them with a mortified expression. “I should really just not talk during these, shouldn’t I?”

Barry rubs at the back of his neck and looks anywhere but her, finding Oliver as the man says, “If you wouldn’t mind, Felicity.”

He’s glad for the excuse to leave the room, if only briefly to change clothes. Despite how she’s phrased it, Barry gets what she means. Training with Oliver is…well it’s brutal. But it’s also exciting, thrilling, sort of rewarding. That the man would bother to try and teach him anything at all makes him feel even more accomplished than if Lance or any of his other coworkers take notice of his skills. And yeah, he probably won’t ever be going up against someone with Oliver’s skill, but it’s awesome to know that maybe someday if it ever, ever happened he’d be prepared at least.

He’s been the certifiable wimpy nerd since he was eleven years old and had to stop taking on bullies to protect the smaller kids because the bullies were already picking on him for who he and his family were. But with the adrenaline singing through his veins, his heart pounding, and the exhilaration and trust and just having this to share with Oliver…it makes him feel alive again.

He’ll take that—a spar, a hand on his shoulder, a thumb brushing over his cheek—whatever way he can get. Oliver’s touch is just…his stomach flip-flops and his face is warm again, almost hot under his fingertips. Barry takes a deep breath, tries to center himself. He’s not even sure what he’s
thinking, or if he wants to know. Wonders if it’s just Felicity’s words and not his own thoughts that have him reacting this way. If it’s leftover embarrassment…or something else.

If he puts himself in positions to test it, ending up in holds with strong arms holding him tightly in place and his back pressed up against a broad, bare chest while Oliver murmurs in a gentle instructor’s tone what he did wrong in his ear, that’s really not anything he has to admit to aloud. The only results he gets are an even redder face, a tingling feeling all throughout that starts at every point of contact, and a wildly pounding heart.

He’s later to work than usual the next morning, finding it hard to get to sleep that night.

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John sits and waits, two files sitting on his lap. When it boils down to it, this is a business visit, so what’s he got to feel nervous for?

If he’s being honest with himself, there are two reasons he’s been finding it hard to maintain what he’s got going with Carly. One is Deadshot, his brother and her late husband’s killer. John can’t breathe easy, can’t let go of Andy, until he’s found the assassin and gotten justice for his brother from him.

The other reason, well, he needs her help to do that. Lyla Michaels. He hasn’t seen her since they went their separate ways stateside, and he’s in equal parts dreading and anticipating it. But Lyla will be cool, he’s sure. She was always confident, in command of her emotions.

He can think of somebody who could learn from her example, and with a heavy sigh his thoughts turn to the matter of Oliver. Oliver whom he hasn’t told about this meetup he’s arranged. Glad as he would be for his friend’s help, John needs to get this investigation going now while the intel he has is still fresh, and the vigilante is a little preoccupied with the Vertigo situation. Among other things.

The other man has been acting very calm about what John tried to discuss with him at Big Belly Burger before the Savior’s first video. Then again, they didn’t get near as far in that discussion as he would’ve liked, and it’s left a lot of time for Oliver to no doubt to assess, rethink.

But if he honestly thinks John’s going to be fooled, then he’s not sure why the man bothered to recruit him for the mission in the first place.

As a bodyguard, one of the things John is very good at—reading, interpreting, and responding to—is body language. In a group like theirs, he might sometimes come off as distant with his closed stance, off a few paces from the rest of them, but the reality is he’s very much there watching everything. Anything he can pick up on to better understand the situation and the people he feels compelled to protect.

It’s a skill he knows Oliver has learned too, one of the many reasons he survived those five years he apparently wasn’t alone on that island. Such heightened spatial awareness helps in his fights as the Hood as well. But for every bit he can pick up from other people, Oliver at times is just as expressive with his own. He’s good at not giving much away around his family, good at playing the billionaire son and brother. As much as he knows Oliver cares about his family, it’s scary sometimes how much of a role he puts forward for them to care about. With his friends, like Tommy before the other man found out, he’s much the same.

But John’s learned to pick up the signals that indicate Oliver is interested in somebody. Learned them well, because usually it means trouble. Laurel, Helena, McKenna once she’d been put on the vigilante taskforce.
It’s the same way, with some subtle differences, he treats Barry. His face and voice taking on a softer quality when the two of them discuss; his eyes going to Barry first before doing a scan of a room he’s entering; his hands always finding Barry’s shoulder, his arm, something to reach out and hold because he wants to.

And if the heated gaze he fixes on the younger man during training or while they were at Nickels’ is any indication, Oliver wants.

The differences, John thinks, come from Barry himself. He’s made it so Oliver doesn’t have to force a lightened tone to joke around with him, it’s just part of the way they speak to each other ever since the scientist first started cracking wise about mafia movies and vigilante rulebooks, and something in Oliver rose to that friendly bait. He has a limitless capacity for smiling, a rarity in Starling, and lately he’s noticed Oliver seems to do whatever he can to earn more and more of them for himself. And the way in which he addresses Oliver’s methods as the Hood as not this is bad but this can be better, appealing to the humanity he seems more convinced than anyone Oliver has a firm hold on.

As for Barry’s body language, anyone can tell John till they’re blue in the face about this ‘girl in Central’, but the girl is six-hundred miles away. And in the here and now, whenever Oliver’s usual control slips and he starts expressing without words, Barry responds. He leans into touches, doesn’t question when they linger, his smiles tick up just a bit brighter especially when Oliver returns them, his barely controlled protective rage as he’ charged to the defense of the man against his own supposed best friend. Whether he consciously realizes it or not, his physicality is giving it away. Which is why John doesn’t get why Oliver’s trying to pretend. Sure, he has a feeling Barry might be an anomaly in a long, long line of women, but he hardly thinks after everything his friend’s gone through he’s holding onto any of that prejudice. If that’s the only thing standing in the way of his happiness then he sure as hell hopes not. Because Oliver is happy with Barry; it’s not uncommon to hear the man laugh in response to something the scientist has said or done, which is otherwise hard to come by around anyone else. He gravitates to the younger man, tries to be near as he can whenever possible. Draws a sort of strength or calm just from a touch. And being first and foremost Oliver’s bodyguard, those are the kinds of things that matter to John, that he wants to ensure happen. He’s unfortunately a bit lost on how, though, and preoccupied with more than enough than to try and tackle this in the latest of Oliver Queen issues.

After Deadshot. After Andy’s able to rest. After he and Carly are good again.

Then he spots her, Lyla, coming toward him. They talk, he gives her the files on Garcia—the man who books Lawton’s targets—and Chen, asks her to look into it as a favor to an old army buddy. Maybe he’s trying to pretend too.

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Quentin has to wonder why the world does this to him. After three months of nothing, Vertigo has come back with a vengeance—and his best lead goes straight back to his daughter’s boyfriend. He’s only just gotten back into Laurel’s good graces after that stunt with the phone which, much as it pains him to admit, he was entirely in the wrong for.

This, though, he doesn’t know yet if in this case the hunch might turn out to be right. No matter how much of Laurel’s ire he incurs in the process, he’s going to have to follow it to the end. Particularly now that the Count’s engineered an escape from his mental institution. He doesn’t like to think that a man so dangerous and not even crazy is out there peddling his wares, possibly with the help of someone his daughter cares for.
He climbs up the steps to the lab again to check on Allen. As much as he is the old dog with a bone, set in his ways of closing cases no matter what the cost, Allen is the puppy. Excitable, eager to please, unable to stay still. But he’s a good bit smarter than the average puppy around here, so he can learn to put up with it if it gets him results. The kid had been going on about new formulas and blood samples and autopsy reports this morning, and he wants to have all his facts right about the drug before he goes knocking on Queen and Merlyn’s club door again.

“Chlorpromazine,” Allen states as soon as he spots him in the lab’s doorway.

“You want to try that again?”

“It’s an anti-psychotic,” the forensic assistant elaborates. “Not part of the original Vertigo formula but present in all of the recent victims’ systems. I’m thinking he might have got the idea to add it while in the county’s mental health institute, maybe even took some of their supply while he was there or escaping. Cause he’s going to need loads to keep up production.”

“You’re saying we need to check their inventory? Supply routes?” He surmises and the kid nods. “Alright. You can get started, come on.” Quentin jabs his thumb in the direction of the exit, then heads back out.

“Uh, detective?” The kid calls, but moments later is following after him.

“They just came off lockdown from the escape. Means you can take a look at their stock and the like while I run down a lead on a potential distributor.”

They make it out to the parking lot before Allen can’t seem to help asking, “Who’s that, sir?”

He grimaces just thinking about it. Whether he’s right, whether he’s wrong, what this is going to do to him and Laurel all over again. He gets in his squad car with Allen sliding into the passenger seat. “Merlyn.” The kid looks at him with wide eyes and his mouth drops open, like even he thinks Quentin’s insane for pursuing it. “Bribed a zoning commissioner to skip the inspection of the club he’s managing. Lot of people in that business offer their clientele more than music and booze,” he feels some need to explain. Not because he doubts his hunch, just doubts whether Allen’s set foot in a club even once in his life.

After twenty-some minutes of stilted attempts by Allen to make conversation, the police radio crackles to life with, “We have a code 99 at the aquarium. All units”

He’s surprised when the kid gives a start. “That’s a hostage situation.”

“You know the codes?” It’s not like it’s required of him. Nobody’s expecting the lab and tech types to respond to a call, much less would want them to.

“My foster father’s a cop. Actually a detective,” Allen explains with a gesture to Quentin’s badge. “His daughter and I memorized them when we were kids so we’d always know what he was going to.”

He thinks of Laurel and Sara years back watching with big eyes as he’d strap on his badge and gun and leave during another dinner, another birthday, another Christmas.

“I had some trouble when I moved here, though, cause some of the codes are different,” Allen’s still talking. “You know Central City? It’s like six-hundred miles east of here—”

“Yeah, I’m pretty familiar, my ex-wife lives there,” he cuts off the verbal tour before it can commence.
“…oh,” is the kid’s reply in a very small voice. After another minute, though, he points to the police radio. “So shouldn’t we turn around or…?”

“We’re pretty far out now to respond.” And with his temper Pike’s made it pretty clear in the past he’d rather have Quentin uninvolved in such situations. “Anyway I better drop you off first.” Allen’s got no business in a hostage crisis and if his lead’s any good it’ll be better to put him on it right away. Especially since the report comes in that the aggressor is believed to be under the influence of Vertigo. The faster they can trace this back to the source the better.

At last they’re pulling up at the front gates of the institution, as far as his car’s allowed due to security concerns over the recent breakout.

Allen’s out of the car and walking around the front of it already, so he has to roll down his window, call his name so that he stops and approaches the driver’s side again. “Don’t know how long any of this’ll take. So when you’re finished, just try me or Hilton for a lift back.”

Sending Allen on this investigative errand is like dropping a kid off for school. He gives Quentin a bright smile and an, “Ok,” hefts his satchel higher on his shoulder, then is loping off toward the front gate. He even does a quick look over the shoulder at the departing squad car that he catches in the rearview mirror. Quentin shakes his head. Time to track down a hard lead like he knows how.

By the time he’s back in the vicinity of the aquarium, the hostage crisis is already ended, with the perp becoming a vic. No word on official cause of death yet because—icing on the cake—of course the Hood showed up. Only to put an arrow in a guy’s hand this time, as opposed to through some vital organ or other. Quentin is therefore on edge, fists and teeth clenched when he marches into the Verdant. It’s Merlyn and a couple staff on hand to greet him inside.

“Can I help you, Detective?” The young man isn’t fooling around with pleasantries. He’s tense, wary even as Quentin approaches, almost like he’s been expecting this. But after his visit to his daughter’s apartment last night, he’d be an idiot not to.

So he cuts to the chase. “You bribed a zoning commissioner $10,000 to skip your inspection. Now you can wait a day for me to come back with a warrant or we can have a look around now if everything is as above board as you say it is. Though it’ll still leave me a pretty big question of why that bribe.” If Merlyn will just be reasonable, maybe this can all just blow over. He’s torn between hoping this man’s innocent for Laurel’s sake and hoping he’s right for the case’s sake. It’s an ugly feeling.

Merlyn takes a deep breath. “Your daughter would probably advise me to make you get that warrant. But we’ve got nothing to hide like you’re thinking.” He steps aside, and with a scowl Quentin moves past him.

He sweeps the whole main floor just to be thorough, but eventually he locates a door, one he’s positive goes down to a lower floor not listed in the new club’s plans. But when Merlyn gets it open for him, all he finds is a mess of a storage area. Crates full of nothing but alcohol.

“The ventilation down here is from the sixties. We probably shouldn’t be open with this, but we needed more capital to get it fixed.”

“Financial trouble for the both of you, huh? That’s new,” he remarks, a cheap shot out of pure frustration. There’s no doubt Laurel’s going to hear about this and it’ll put them at odds again over Merlyn and Queen for nothing. “Just where is the owner of the dump?”

“He tends to get here later,” is the flat response.
“Yeah, well tell him he better have all this fixed up.” He waves an arm around in demonstration before storming out of the place.

His leads have dried up and when he gets to the station it’s much the same. The only noteworthy news that comes out of the aquarium situation, aside from the Hood’s uncharacteristic nonlethal approach, is that the official C.O.D. is an allergic reaction to that anti-psychosis stuff Allen was going on about.

He figures he can at least see how the kid’s getting along with that investigation of the inventory and supply routes. But Allen isn’t in that cramped little corner lab, any of the other labs, or even the break room. He comes back down to the squad room to find Hilton as his desk.

“Hey Hilt, did Allen head out already?” It’s unlike him to do so without leaving even part of his findings for the day, he’s learned.

His fellow detective and often partner furrows his brow. “Thought he left earlier with you.”

“I dropped him at that mental institute to check up on something. Going on a few hours ago.” It’s long past dark now, and there’s no way he could have found a cab all the way out there. “He never called you?” He pulls out his own to check again, but no, still nothing. Hilton shakes his head. Quentin gets an uneasy feeling, goes back to his car.

“Then where the hell is that kid?”

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh...Barry's in trouble again. And also having some, to his mind, troubling observations when it comes to Oliver. Next chapter we'll see the former resolved at least. Thanks so much for reading and I'd love to know any thoughts!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Ok so long chapter to make up for the cliff-hanger. Lot of stuff happening and I'm excited to see people's thoughts. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver is speeding down dark roads on his bike, thoughts a torrid mix of adrenaline-heightened calm for this next step of the mission and mind-numbing panic for Barry. It’s a scene he is not happy to be growing familiar with.

These past few days have been a dispiriting indictment of his attempts at leniency. Vertigo, the drug that nearly took Thea’s life, is quickly taking the streets back over. That any of this is happening is his fault for not using the more permanent solution against the Count last time.

That knowledge had been sitting heavy within him this afternoon when news of the aquarium hostage situation broke. He’d made his way to the foundry and begun to work alone until Felicity had dropped by. He’d just finished explaining to her what he was making was an antidote and not tea, when his phone started to buzz beside him on the table. Oliver had ignored it.

“Your phone’s ringing,” she tells him helpfully.

“If it isn’t Dig, I really don’t have the time,” he’d dismissed as she leaned over to check the caller ID.

“It’s Barry.”

Oliver had drawn in a breath through his nose, pressed his lips tight together. But that only lasted for about a second. “Put him on speaker.”

The scientist hadn’t waited for either of them to speak. Once Felicity had put the call through Barry’s voice had come over in a rush. “Oliver if you’re not at the foundry you need to get over there now. Lance is on his way—”

“What?” Both he and Felicity had interjected sharply.

“Oh, hey Felicity. Um, how’s—you know what, never mind.” Barry had thought better of taking the time for pleasantries and instead continued, “He thinks Tommy’s dealing drugs out of the Verdant because of the bribe you guys paid—”

“What bribe?” He asks, baffled. He’d been sure despite the circumstantial evidence of Veronica Sparks’ last text that his best friend was innocent, but if he’d paid a bribe…

“What do you mean ‘what bribe’? The $10,000 he paid a zoning commissioner not to go poking around your Cave!”

“My what?”

“Oh my God, Oliver, you didn’t know you had to do that?” Barry’d been far more interested in demanding than answering. “How did you—ok, either way Lance is heading over to look around
now and if you don’t let him in he’ll definitely have grounds for a warrant.”
“We need to clean out the Cave!” Felicity had gasped in realization, then had started frantically moving around the foundry packing things away, starting with her precious computers.

Oliver had ignored the impulse to ask just what exactly the other two kept calling their base of operations and instead transferred the mixture of island herbs into a syringe. “I need to get to the aquarium. Felicity, you’ll have to ask Tommy to help you clear up. He’s in the club. And send Dig along when he gets back in contact! Barry—”

“I’m gonna be back pretty late tonight. Doing some inventory checks—chlorpromazine. Just have Felicity hack the file I made at work under Vertigo, it’s got my notes. That’s so weird I’m telling you to hack my own—”

“Bye, Barry,” he’d said loudly while grabbing up his gear.

“Uh, right, bye!”

Then it had been off to the aquarium. He’d been able to stop any of the hostages from being hurt, but the man on Vertigo had died before he could administer the antidote. Things had only gotten worse upon his return to the Verdant. Felicity had been waiting in the back alley with the most incriminating of the foundry’s equipment in her car, ready to speed away should Lance have decided to poke his head out there. But it had been Tommy who had emerged after a few tense minutes of waiting with her, and he’d given the all clear.

While Felicity had moved back inside with her tablet, Oliver had approached his best friend.

“Thank you,” he’d said, trying to convey how sincerely he’d meant it.

But though Tommy had nodded, he’d also replied, “I didn’t like having to do that, Oliver. These people you got working with you—I’m not them. Think that was made pretty clear last week. I don’t know if I can live this kind of double-life like you all do.” He’d left soon after that, with Oliver unsure as to what that meant for them going forward.

Of course, this was when Diggle had decided to arrive, apparently having been busy on his own mission against Lawton. And they’d both had things to say that the other didn’t want to hear, accusations on each side of prioritizing their own personal vendettas. The other man had turned back around for home as well.

Frustrated beyond belief, Oliver had finally reentered the current mess of the foundry, where Felicity had wisely refrained from commenting and instead looked up the autopsy report of Vertigo’s most recent victim.

“It wasn’t an overdose that killed him. He had an allergic reaction to chlorpromazine. It’s an anti-psychotic Barry noticed was present in all the other victims. That’s what he was trying to tell you earlier.”

“So it’s the new ingredient in the formula. The Count must have added it in.”

“But wouldn’t the amount he need for manufacture be huge? Where would he get that much?” She’d asked.

And the realization had been so simple. “A mental institution. He’s faked his escape, just like he faked being insane. So while everyone is looking for him outside the asylum, he’s safe inside perfectly able to keep up the operation.” He’d already been able to feel the familiar rage boiling below the surface. Someone so extreme as the Count should have been dealt with accordingly, not
given this second chance.

His grim musings had been cut short by the note of dread in Felicity’s voice as she’d said, “He might be safe, but he’s not alone. Oliver…Barry was doing inventory checks at the asylum.”

He’d gone sprinting out the door and to his bike without another thought. Now as he steadily approaches the institution unsure of what he’ll find all he can do is gun the engine, drive all the faster, and try not to think about the fact that the last thing he said to Barry was goodbye.

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Barry’s lying flat on the tiled floor on his stomach holding his breath and hoping to any being or deity in existence that nobody’s going to do the obvious and check under the bed.

There’d been an eerie quiet in the halls and the dim gray color seemed to mute the effect of the rapidly failing sunlight when he’d been shown in to the Starling County Institute for Mental Health. That should have tipped Barry off right away this place was bad news. It was gloomier than Iron Heights.

But he’d only gone up to a secretary’s desk and shown his ID. She’d lead him into a room far in the rear of the facility before being called away, paged by a Dr. Webb. There’d been rows upon rows of boxed up supplies, and the organization could have really used some work. Armed with sheaves of shipment receipts and prescription sign-outs, Barry had gotten started.

It was slow, slow work and if he had known better he’d have thought it’d been designed to be this difficult on purpose. But he hadn’t been able to just give up so he kept at it. Long after he probably should have been there.

He hadn’t realized that until after he’d finished a thorough check for chlorpromazine and found the institution’s supply severely lacking from what the receipts might otherwise have indicated. “But if the medicine really made it here, the Count couldn’t have stolen it.” Barry had spoken aloud, trying to puzzle it out. “So he’s not the manufacturer? But somebody’s still using the chlorpromazine in here.” He’d started to shuffle through the receipts, see who had signed for them, but had caught sight of the time on his wristwatch. “Oh man, I should really not be here.”

“Very true,” had said an unfamiliar male voice, a man in a lab coat. Barry had given a bit of a start, and only relaxed marginally when he’d spotted him.

“Sorry, Dr.- uh, Dr. Webb,” he’d had to squint to make out the nametag. “I didn’t realize it was so late. The secretary was going to come get me, I thought—”

“She’s been sent home for the evening,” the doctor had said in this manner that had made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. “Most of the staff, actually. Except who I need.” It had been then that Barry noticed the large, burly-looking orderly at the end of the aisle. It had also been about then that he remembered that he really, really didn’t like psychiatrists.

But Barry had tried to keep his tone and stance relaxed as he’d replied. “Right, well, I think I have everything I need for my report. And I think I remember the way out fine, so—”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t allow you to do that,” Webb had interrupted, and though his tone was still mild it had lacked any warmth. “You know too much, your little investigation is going to bring the police right back to me after I managed to misdirect them.”

Barry had gaped. “You’re the one manufacturing Vertigo?”
Webb had nodded, then off-handedly remarked, “So I can’t let you go, you see? You’ve really left me no choice.”

The orderly had started walking forward, the shadows cast by the high shelving units menacing on his hulking form. And he’d known that even with the little amount of training he’d had with Oliver, there’d have been no way he would win this fight.

So it’d been someone else’s advice told to him long ago that had come to mind. “Son... sometimes the best way to win a fight is not to start one. But if you do come up against somebody you know you can’t beat, be smart. It’s ok to run the other way.”

He’d doubted Joe West would be very happy knowing he’d sort of started this one, but Barry’d continued to utilize the rest of that wisdom. He’d backed to the end of the aisle, the orderly already halfway down it with Webb following behind, and taken hold of one of the shelves. Fortunately they hadn’t been bolted to the floor so ramming it with his shoulder had caused it to topple.

“Argh!” Had been all he’d waited around to hear. The other two men had been forced to stop to push against the shelf and keep it from fully collapsing on them. Barry had used the opportunity to run up another aisle and out the open door. The lights had nearly all been turned off in the place, making it seem strange and unfamiliar to his eyes. He’d thought he was going the right way, but after fruitless minutes of running produced no exit he’d been forced to conclude he was lost. And he’d been able to pick up the sounds of Webb and the orderly making their way after him.

He’d backed into another room—a patient’s room, he’d realized with a cringe upon spotting someone tied down to a chair, staring with blank expression at the wall. The Count. Barry had frozen in place, but the creator of Vertigo didn’t so much as blink. The sounds of the others’ approach had grown louder, and so he’d simply opted for dropping to the ground and rolling underneath the empty patient’s bed to avoid being seen.

Now Barry is still there a good fifteen minutes later. He’s tempted to inch out his phone, but terrified a conversation would be too loud, give him away. He doesn’t know whether Webb and his orderly will decide he found his way out and leave themselves, but he’s hoping for it. He hasn’t heard anything from them for a while now.

But then there’s a single set of footsteps coming towards the room, so careful and soft he’s probably only picking them up because he’s pressed against the floor. He tenses up but whoever they belong to doesn’t seem intent on his hiding place, instead crossing over to the Count. It’s as they do so that he gets a look at the boots. A set of very unique, very familiar boots.

They might be the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. Barry wants to cry. Instead he tries a loud as he dares, “Hey.”

Which is totally a mistake. Apparently the vigilante’s already got an arrow drawn back to take on the mindless Count, it seems, but he’s more than willing to loose it in Barry’s direction. He gives a yelp when the arrow embeds itself in the mattress, the point just jutting through the bottom inches above his head. He gives another one when strong hands grab at his ankles and then his hips to yank him out from underneath the bed. He’s flipped over onto his back and stares up into the masked face of the Hood.

But it’s Oliver whose expression takes on an immensely relieved quality. “Barry,” he breaths, a smile lighting his whole face for the briefest of moments. Then his eyes flicker once more to the Count, who’s yet to make a sound or move.

“It’s not him,” Barry has the presence of mind to say. “There’s a psychiatrist here who’s been
making it, he’s—look out!”

The orderly, probably drawn by the noise, has come up behind Oliver, who just manages to dodge the blow aimed for his head. It lands squarely on his shoulder however, and he’s forced to his hands and knees over Barry. Pinned like this as he is, Barry is still able to reach out and grab the bow that’s clattered to the floor, offering it to Oliver who shifts off his hands to turn and use it to block the next hit while straddling Barry’s waist. But the orderly first wrenches on the bow then grips the side of Oliver’s head and bashes it against the bedframe. He drops fully onto Barry now, limp and looking dazed.

“No, no, come on, Ol—uh, Hood guy. Arrow man. I don’t know!” Barry urges, pushing at Oliver’s shoulders partly to try and rouse him and partly to try and wriggle out from under him. Neither of them are any good like this!

But then the orderly clamps a hand down, forces his head and neck to turn. There’s the prick of a needle and his vision’s going fuzzy and Oliver’s being lifted off him and—no, please don’t do that.

When he wakes, he hears voices. One he recognizes better than the other. “Cops came around, started asking questions. You faked the Count’s disappearance to draw attention away from yourself. It’s clever.” Oliver. Barry tries to sit up, but his wrists and ankles won’t budge. He becomes aware that he’s strapped down to a medical table.

“Seems our nosy CSI has rejoined us,” says Webb standing over another table where Oliver’s restrained. Hood down, mask off. Barry tries to sit up again, anxiety ratcheting up while Webb keeps talking. “You already seem familiar with him. Is he yours? Took him the space of a day to nearly figure out the whole operation.”

“Well he’s cleverer than you,” is Oliver’s response, confident despite their precarious situation.

Webb looks almost regretful walking over to address Barry as he states, “I wasn’t trying to be a criminal mastermind. If you hadn’t come looking I wouldn’t have to do this.”

“You still don’t,” Barry attempts to reason, not really keen on finding out whatever ‘this’ is.

Webb shakes his head. “I needed the money Vertigo could give me. I still do.” Then he’s turning back to Oliver. “Something I’m sure a billionaire like yourself, Mr. Queen, wouldn’t understand.”

“Believe me, I understand you perfectly,” Oliver replies, the disgust in his tone clear.

Webb just nods to the orderly. “Open his mouth.” The other man has been standing off to the side next to a vat of some kind. The liquid inside is an almost luminescent green, which he recognizes from that long ago sample of concentrated Vertigo he once got asked to analyze.

“What? No! No!”

“Oliver!” He shouts at the same time Oliver turns his head, clenches his jaw shut. The orderly’s working to get it open even as Oliver presses his lips tight, wrenches his head from side to side. “No, don’t! Please, you can’t, don’t do this!” Barry is begging, pulling against the restraints as useless as it is while Webb lifts the vat up, pauses just to the side of Oliver.

“You might want to save it,” the psychiatrist says to Barry, then tips the vat over struggling vigilante. Try as the other man might, some of it is getting in his “Either way, you’ll both be found dead of an overdose tomorrow. From what I’ve seen of the tabloids, that shouldn’t be too much of a surprise for
Oliver Queen. As for you, Mr. Allen—"

“No! No, leave him alone, Webb! You bastard, don’t touch him!” Oliver is practically snarling even as he coughs violently, voice hoarse and eyes hazy, straining against his bonds, but now Barry’s the one fighting against a grip on his jaw, fingers pinching his nose as his head’s forced back. “Barry!”

“—I took the liberty of looking you up. You have quite the extensive history with psychiatrics, don’t you? After ‘the man in the lightning’,” Webb tilts the vat and the remaining liquid sloshes over. “I don’t think it’ll be a stretch of the imagination for anyone to believe you’ve succumbed to the use of narcotics.”

Tears are stinging in his eyes as he coughs and splutters, anything to keep the potent liquid from being swallowed. But it burns on its way down his throat and it’s scary how quickly he loses his hold on what’s happening. Webb might still be talking, he doesn’t know, but someone is screaming his name. His vision blurs around the edges even while other things come into sharper focus like Oliver thrashing on the table and the restraints on the older man’s arms snapping off. Webb moving away from Barry in shock and alarm. Barry hands shake and everything is too bright, he feels hot and cold at once and the tears leak from his eyes and drip onto the table either side of his face as Oliver is getting to his feet. A wordless cry of warning is torn from his lips when the orderly swims into view wielding an IV stand.

Then there’s a loud crash as someone new breaks into the room—Dig—and the orderly is kicked in the back, dropping the stand. Webb is gone. Oliver lunges for something in the pile of bow, quiver, and arrows, something in a syringe.

Oliver’s half-dragged himself over the table just to grab it, but his gleaming, too-bright eyes lock with Barry’s, conflicted. “Antidote. Only one.” The words are a grunt, like speaking itself requires more strength than the older man has at the moment. Barry doesn’t have the strength either, just grits his teeth and flops his head to the side in a no. Oliver gets it. “I’m sorry.” He plunges it into his own chest, drops out of sight.

A moment later Barry hears retching and his head spins and he thinks he’ll be sick too and dimly he registers Oliver’s retreating back but he’s gone and Barry’s alone and can’t move, can’t breathe. It’s all so much, too much. He doesn’t think this can be real, feeling like this, it isn’t possible.

Impossible things…the light hanging over his head turns a crackling yellow and red racing around and around and he’s there, the Man in the Lightning, he’s so real and he’s going to make him drink more of this poison, isn’t he? No. No, that was Webb, he used the rest already, on Oliver. Oliver, where is Oliver?

“Barry, you need to come back to us, ok? Barry? Damnit,” someone is saying above him. It sounds serious. “Oliver, get over here!”

He doesn’t realize he’s been kicking and writhing like a hot wire against the restraints until two sets of hands are pressing him back down, one hand more gentle when it smooths back the hair from his clammy, sweat-soaked forehead. It’s a cool touch to his overheated skin, doesn’t add to the sick, roiling feeling of his insides, and he nuzzles into it with a whine.

“Shh, Barry. You need to calm down, it’ll slow the spread of it through your system. I only brought the one antidote with me. I’m sorry, I should’ve—”

“D’ja…get Webbs?” He manages to croak. His eyes slowly open and somehow find Oliver, hooded and masked again, and the older man nods. “Awesome. Go team.”
And Oliver smiles at him but there’s something sad about it that Barry doesn’t understand. Then the other man is slipping his arms underneath and lifting him up into his arms. “We’re getting you back to the foundry and fixing an antidote,” he explains, voice still ragged and weary even if his hold is secure, when Barry squirms at the unexpected movement.

He settles in, comfortable now with that knowledge. “’kay. Prob’ly need water. And sleep. Specially you, you were sick.”

“Thank you, Dr. Allen.”

Barry grins up at him. “Very funny. That’s my dad.”

“Oliver, we got trouble,” Dig has reappeared, and as he speaks there’s an occasional banging sound getting louder. “Lance.”

Another bang, coupled with a call of, “Allen?”

Oliver is scowling, and shifts his hold so Barry is curled into his chest. “Diggle, we are not leaving him.”

“I don’t like it either, but there’s no way he can come back with us without it being suspicious, Oliver. Lance’ll get him to a hospital. Now we got to go.”

Barry’s not sure if it’s his frightfully skewed perception right now or if Oliver actually is growling as he sets him back down. He maybe makes a grab for the vigilante’s jacket, but his hands are forced to his sides. A final sweep of fingers through his hair, and it’s less comforting this time when he knows it’s because they’re going to leave him. Dig’s already gone, having no hood or mask to protect his identity.

He’s not given too much time to work up a panic again. The door’s kicked in, and Detective Lance has a gun. “Allen!” Then the gun points at Oliver. “You!”

“This man was forced to drink concentrated Vertigo,” Oliver’s voice sounds deep and strange for some reason, and he thinks he’d laugh if his stomach didn’t already feel like heaving. “You need to get him to a hospital now, Detective.” Oliver backs away a step and Lance’s face is screwed up but he’s not firing the gun, just pointing it, then nodding once to the other exit, and Oliver’s gone too. Then the grizzled man darts forward, to chase he thinks at first, but instead Lance holsters his weapon and stops at his table.

“The Count’s next room over loony as can get, Webb’s got an arrow in him, and what the hell did he let happen to you?”

“Wasn’t the Hood,” Barry groans, though it’s an effort when Lance is hauling him up into a sitting position and the world sways dangerously.

“Hey, hey kid. Look at me, kid, you’re not doing too good.” Lance is steadying him, eyes taking in his likely wreck of an appearance.

“Webb, he made me drink it.” He lifts a sluggish arm to gesture at the empty vat of Vertigo solution.

“Shit.”

“Not th’whole thing. I’d be dead. But the Hood was—he stopped it. Saved me.” Barry idly wonders if he’s hamming it up a bit, and he feels bad having to leave out Dig. He thinks the other man prefers to remain anonymous, though.
He wobbles when Lance gets him to slide off the table onto his feet, then collapses forward into the other man. “Still don’t feel too great.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t think so. Alright.” With a grunt, Lance is hefting him into his arms. Barry has a real fear this time he might be dropped. “Just hang on, kid, ok? We’re gonna get you help. You’re gonna be fine.”

He doesn’t really want the help of Lance carrying him to a squad car to go to the hospital. He wanted the help of Oliver carrying him to Dig’s car to go to the Cave, but beggars can’t be choosers especially when they’re ditched. He’s glad the detective chooses not to throw him over his shoulder which might’ve been easier, and puzzles over the strange warble in Lance’s voice.

He’d much rather lie down in the back, but Lance puts him in the passenger seat, buckles him in. “You can’t go to sleep, alright Allen? You gotta stay awake.”

Barry wishes he could sleep. But everything is loud and bright and Lance keeps prodding him every few minutes as they race over bumpy roads. He must manage it at some point, though, because even though people keep saying hospital and help and the like, he has no memory of getting there.

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Laurel strides through the automatic doors, eyes sweeping the hospital’s waiting room. When Tommy had come back to the apartment earlier this evening and told her what had happened at the club with her father, she’d been upset, even furious. Why did he have to do things like this, like he almost wanted her to hate him?

But she’d calmed down. With Tommy’s help, she’d been willing to acknowledge her father really was compelled to follow evidence, even if it got entangled with personal issues. And he probably wasn’t too happy about having to do it.

So Laurel had made her way to the bar she knew he still frequented at times like this, when he felt he couldn’t turn to her or anyone else. But she’d been surprised to find him not there. Then at the precinct she’d been told he was headed to the hospital with a coworker.

Which brings her here. She spots him slouched in one of the hard, plastic chairs, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hands. Laurel makes her way over. “Hey.”

He looks up, then is hurrying to his feet, setting the cup aside. “Laurel. Listen, honey, I’m sorry about everything with Merlyn. I wasn’t trying to jam him up or screw things up between us, ok?”

She sighs. “We can talk about that later, dad. What happened? They said your coworker- is it Hilton?”

“No, no, Hilt’s fine,” her father shakes his head. The relieved look he has at her being here not to argue drops, however, as he says, “One of the CSIs. He figured out, turns out we were all chasing the wrong guys. The Vertigo was coming from Count’s doctor at the institute, Webb. And I sent that kid to go poking around cause I had to make that stupid run at your boyfriend,” her father says, running hand through wildly tangled hair and pacing a few steps away. Then he turns back to her. “The psycho went and poured a load of the stuff down his throat, now they’re pumping his stomach, and the whole damn thing is my fault.” He drops back into his chair.

Laurel takes the one next to him, places a hand on his shoulder. “You couldn’t have known.”

“Yeah well the Hood did,” he remarks bitterly. “Got Webb right in the heart.” Then grudgingly, like it’s painful to even admit, “Saved Allen’s life.”
And while her father giving any sort of credit to the Hood is almost unheard of, there’s something else that causes Laurel to give a start. “Allen?”

“Yeah, he’s one of the newer ones. Came in about a year ago, you probably haven’t seen him much,” he tells her. Then quirks his lips in some approximation of a smile, wane as it is. “Real bright kid. On the right track the whole time with this, anyway.”

Laurel finds herself smiling back for a number of reasons, some of which her father isn’t privy to. Like the fact that she has seen this particular CSI before. “High praise,” is all she says.

“Well, he deserves it.” The rougher edges of his features have softened somewhat, but now they’re dulled even more by a glum expression. “They’re hoping to get most of the Vertigo out with this, but there might still be some in his system that’s just got to work itself out. They still don’t have an antidote for this stuff.” He lets out a breath through his nose, leans his head back against the wall.

“Are you going to wait here?”

He nods. “Till there’s word, anyway. He hasn’t got anyone else in the whole city, you know.”

Laurel’s not sure that’s true. It sounds an awful lot like Barry Allen’s got a guardian angel. Still, she gets up and says, “Then we’re going to need more coffee.”

Her father’s grateful smile is something more than worth the wait.

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Felicity was wrong before, about Oliver’s pacing around Barry and his workstation being like a caged animal. Now that Barry is not here and Oliver is still choosing to pace around his vacant workstation, he’s a caged animal.

It’s late morning, and things have not been going well for Oliver. They’ve restored the Cave, thankfully, but after the previous evening’s stunt, Tommy has apparently resigned as manager of the Verdant. Felicity supposes it must take a toll blatantly lying to his girlfriend’s father about his vigilante best friend, and if some distance is what it takes to preserve Tommy and Oliver’s shaky relationship at this point perhaps it’s for the best.

He’s tried sparring and talking with Diggle about the various angles they can take to pursue Floyd Lawton, aka Deadshot, but the former army man seems to realize their friend is distracted even if he means well, and has let him go.

As for Felicity, she is accommodating him by hacking into Starling General for updates and surveillance. And finally she’s able to tell him, “Barry’s been discharged.” Oliver looks about to head for the stairs, so she holds up a hand and adds, “But it looks like Lance is giving him a ride home.”

The man’s brow furrows and he says with heavy frustration, “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” None of them have been able to stop by the hospital for a visit yet, as Lance has been sticking to the scientist like glue, something that she can tell is getting under Oliver’s skin. His irritation with the detective for it is just a little amusing, though she won’t dare to voice that out loud. If the look Dig sends her behind Oliver’s back is any indication, however, she’s not alone in thinking it.

But the aggravation is something she only wants to put up with for so long, so she dutifully follows the squad car’s course through traffic cams, is relieved when Lance does nothing more than let Barry
off at the front door of his building. “Ok, we’re in the clear.” This time Oliver does leave right away. “So we’re getting Barry from his apartment where he’s resting…so he can come rest here?” She summarizes, just to be sure.

“Oliver wants to administer that antidote, just in case the Vertigo’s not fully out of Barry’s system,” Dig tells her, then says, “And he wasn’t too happy leaving him behind last night.”

She’d felt pretty terrible about it, too, when the other two men had returned minus Barry. For one heart-stopping moment, from the grim look on Oliver’s face, she had thought the worst had happened. So really she doesn’t mind it if Oliver wants to drag the scientist out of bed and give him a ride—to the Cave! A ride, in a car, to the Cave.

Shortly thereafter, Oliver is leading a groggy Barry down the steps of the Cave. She’s up and out of her chair, rushing over to give her friend a hug. “How are you feeling?”

“Just kind of out of it, I guess. Not as bad as last night. Things got really weird,” he tells her, a tired smile on his face.

“The cot’s over here, Barry,” Oliver says, his voice quieter than usual, and he guides the younger man over, prompts him to lie back on it. “The antidote’s going to take a few minutes.”

“Ok,” Barry says, then rolls onto his side to watch Oliver walk over to a table. “Is it going to make me sick?”

Oliver actually chuckles, shakes his head. “No.”

“You were sick.”

“Well I injected it straight into my bloodstream. We’re going to let it process through your system more naturally.”

“Ok.” Then, seemingly restless, he flops over onto his other side. “Hey, Dig.”

“Hey, Barry.” The other man smiles, gets up and walks over. “I gave a friend of mine the information you pulled about Chen. She’s going to look into it.”

“Great. Hey, Dig?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for the save. I told them it was the Hood, but I know it was you, too. I remember,” Barry tells the man seriously.

Dig’s lips twitch, and like Felicity he’s maybe trying not to laugh. “Well that’s good.” It shouldn’t be funny, but Barry’s just so smiley and ok and they’re all pretty relieved she thinks. She can see how even the grumpy Detective Lance would’ve wanted to hang around the scientist as long as he did.

It’s a few minutes later now and Oliver transfers his herbal not-tea into a cup, lets it cool before walking back over to Barry and easing him back up to sitting. Barry holds the cup with both hands, but it’s Oliver who tilts it and has a hand cradling the back of Barry’s head to stop him from spluttering and turning away.

“Ugh, gross,” the younger man complains.

“I never said it was going to taste good,” Oliver chides, and though it takes several tries he patiently
gets Barry to swallow down the rest.

“Well I’m gonna need something else to get that taste out of my mouth.”

“Like food, right?” Felicity checks nervously.

“Yeah, kind of the idea, why?” When all Felicity can do is shrug helplessly, Barry drops back onto the cot with a defeated groan, curls onto his side away from them all. “I give up.”

“I’ll swing by Big Belly Burger,” Diggle decides, taking out his keys and heading to the steps.

Oliver pats Barry once or twice on the shoulder in commiseration. “Just get some rest.”

Of course since Barry takes the advice, he’s fast asleep by the time Dig returns. None of them have the heart to wake him up, sprawled on his stomach with his arms hugging the pillow and his mouth hanging open just a little. She kind of wants to take a picture. But that would be weird, and creepy, no matter how adorable it is so she just eats her own food with Oliver and Dig. If she sneaks a glance at the sleeping man once or twice, well, it isn’t as often as Oliver.

It’s approaching evening and though he’s been talking with Dig and having Felicity monitor the news stations, Oliver appears to be making no move to go out as the Hood tonight. Which is just as well, because Barry starts to stir and the older man is right there when the scientist blearily opens his eyes, disoriented.

“Did I just nap in the Cave?” Barry sounds a bit more aware, looking up at Oliver with a faint blush rising to his cheeks.

“No, you napped in the foundry,” Oliver tells him matter-of-factly. “I have no idea what ‘cave’ you and Felicity keep talking about, but this isn’t it.”

“Yes it is,” she and Barry both reply at the same time, and Dig gives a snort of laughter when Oliver looks between them sharply.

Barry then sits up and rubs at his eyes while checking his watch. “Oh man, I’m so hungry now.” He smiles brightly when Felicity holds up the remaining takeout bag, but then it drops as a thought occurs to him. “Guess it’s cold by now, huh?”

“That’s not a problem,” Oliver states, perfectly cryptic, before taking the bag and walking across the Cave to a little-used table tucked with an appliance she’s never noticed before and is almost certain wasn’t there even before they had to bug out for Lance’s search.

Felicity’s even surer of it when she notices Barry is gaping at the machine while Oliver starts it up. In fact, he doesn’t quite lose the amazed expression until the older man comes back with the reheated food.

Then Barry beams at Oliver with total adoration, and it might be the sweetest thing she’s ever seen. “You got me a microwave.”

But she’s wrong again, because the sweetest thing is actually the little soft smile playing on Oliver’s face and reaching his eyes as he gives a single-shoulder shrug. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

It’s the kind of moment if it were a movie where one of them ought to say ‘I love you’. Felicity’s not sure if it’s that thought or the fact she’s disappointed when neither does that surprises her more.
So that's the second Vertigo arc finished, with revelations for some of the characters even if it's not Barry or Oliver. Trying to keep things moving into the season one finale. Thanks so much for reading and I'd love to hear any and all feedback!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So glad you all enjoyed last chapter so much. Now in this one it's "Home Invasion" and an invasion from home after word gets back to Central about the Vertigo case!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Could we get lunch? I could use a friend to talk to.

Oliver stares at the message on his phone from Laurel. It’s been a while since they’ve caught up, not since after her mother’s eventful visit to Starling, and he’s not sure what’s brought this on. With Tommy quitting the club and going to more regular working hours at his own father’s company—shocking considering the animosity his best friend’s held towards Malcolm Merlyn since childhood—he’d figured the couple would be taking advantage of their matched-up schedules to spend more time with each other.

But if it’s something Laurel wants he feels almost obligated to oblige her. Of course. When’s a good time? They set something up for later in the week and he doesn’t think about it much until he’s winding down another discussion with his team on how to go about taking down Lawton.

Dig’s leaving to get some more intel from his friend in A.R.G.U.S., Lyla, so that leaves him an opening to make his departure.

“Good. I’ve got to have lunch with Laurel,” he states as casually as he can make it, taking out the keys for his bike. All three other members of the team, however, fix him with a look.

Diggle’s the one to speak up about it. “So when did you become, uh, lunch dates with Laurel?”

Oliver casts his gaze over the other two, who seem uneasy. “They’re not dates,” he insists.

“Right,” Felicity says. “Cause that would be awkward since she has a boyfriend.”

“Who we maybe shouldn’t be trying to make angry right now?” Barry suggests.

“Who we maybe shouldn’t be trying to make angry right now?” Barry suggests.

He shakes his head. “Look, we’re just—we’re friends.” Even if they once were more than that, he’s well aware it can’t ever be that way again. On the island, for a time, he’d held onto a naïve hope that he could return home and make things right with Laurel, be with her again. It had gotten him through some of those first dark days. But it had been a hope, a dream that’s faded as the months have passed and he’s done almost nothing to achieve that goal. Not simply because he can’t, but because he’s found others to get him through these dark days.

Others who sometimes hold the annoying belief that he is constantly making bad judgment calls, as Dig says in an affected light tone, “Friends are good.”

“But?” He prompts, hearing it loud and clear.

“Couldn’t you be friends with someone less complicated than your ex-girlfriend, who’s your sort of ex-best friend’s current girlfriend?”
“I wear a hood and I put arrows into criminals, so when it comes to complexity, I grade on a curve,” he replies.

“Yeah, but that there just kind of bumps up the complexity,” one of the other complications in his life pipes up, and Oliver turns to Barry. “I mean you don’t want Laurel to know about all the vigilante stuff but the more you hang out with her suit or no, the more likely she’s going to find out. Pretty sure she knows I know who you are already, she kept giving me these looks at the hospital when she sat in with me while Detective Lance was calling Joe.”

“Did she ask you anything?” He’s narrowing his eyes in concern, wondering how Barry could have possibly neglected mentioning this before.

But the scientist shakes his head, gives a cheeky grin. “Nah, I just pretended to be asleep.”

“Then she doesn’t know any more than she did, which means she has no reason to connect it to me,” Oliver concludes, the younger man giving a reluctant nod. “So thank you all for your input, but I’m going to be late to a previous commitment.”

It turns out the whole thing doesn’t matter, really, because when he gets to CNRI Laurel is held up with back-to-back meetings. “That’s fine,” he tells her. “I can always catch up on some more paperwork at the club. We’re really behind since Tommy left.”

“Yeah, I really have to thank you for letting him take that opportunity,” Laurel says. “I mean, I was surprised when he went to work for Malcolm, but he seems happier. More relaxed, you know?”

He tries not to let his smile show too much strain at the fact that distance from him has made his oldest friend happier. “That’s good. I want him to be happy, both of you, actually. You’re my friends.” It doesn’t feel complicated right now, it just feels stiff and forced. He’s playing Ollie for Laurel and he doesn’t have to for Tommy, but look where that’s gotten him. And Oliver can’t help but think it’ll be good to get back to the foundry where Barry and Felicity are still waiting.

Before he can excuse himself, a young couple approaches Laurel’s desk, clients. “I’m sorry, are we early?”

“No. not at all,” Laurel assures, then introduces him to the Moores.

He spots a child hiding shyly behind them and can’t resist crouching down, asking, “And this must be your bodyguard?” The kid grins, puffed up in a pleased sort of way even after he’s introduced as their son, Taylor. “Well you’re in very capable hands,” he tells them, straightens back up, and leaves the building.

His lighter mood dims when it’s only Felicity in the foundry upon his return. “Where’s Barry?”

“Oh, he had to take a call, he’ll be right back.”

He shrugs, strips off his shirt, and takes up the bamboo sticks.

It’s another ten minutes of exercises and Felicity typing away at her computer before the scientist does return. But he’s wide-eyed and pale. Oliver immediately sets the sticks aside. “Barry, what’s wrong?”

The younger man’s gaze falls on him. “That was Joe.” Oliver notices he’s still clutching the phone in his hand. “He’s managed to get some days off… my family’s coming to visit.”

There’s a pause, and he exchanges a look with Felicity. “Ok,” the woman says slowly. “That sounds
nice of them. They probably should, I mean, you were taken captive by a crazy psychiatrist—huh, that’s funny. And forced to overdose on drugs, why would they not come see you?”

Oliver has to guess that Felicity knows this isn’t actually Barry’s family they’re talking about. Not his blood-related family, at any rate. But from the way Barry’s mentioned the name Joe before in casual conversation, he’s thought that there was a decent relationship between Barry and his foster relatives, if not a good one.

“Do you not want to see them?” He has to ask, and Barry blinks.

“No! No, of course I do, it’s just, well…” he runs a hand through his hair, mussing it up, and then drags it down to rest at the back of his neck. “I’m going to be pretty useless while they’re here. For this kind of stuff, I mean,” he adds, waving his free hand around the foundry. “They’ll be staying with me, probably, and Joe’s a cop and it’ll be really hard to get away so—”

“Barry,” he states, getting the other man to stop and look at him again. He walks over as he says, “It’s ok. We’ll be fine if you need to spend time with your family. You should take some time off anyway.”

He seems to think it over, eyes lowered to Oliver’s chest rather than his face before he looks back up and nods after a moment. “Ok. But call me if there’s a problem or emergency or something, cause I can make up an excuse. Really.”

Oliver nods. “When are they getting in?”

“Probably sometime tomorrow, they’re looking at tickets,” is his reply.

“Alright. Do you want to train now?”

Barry’s answering smile is telling enough. Oliver will take as many as he can get before this visit disrupts things.

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The next morning the Wests haven’t yet arrived, and Barry is glad because he’s at a crime scene. A terrible crime scene. Mr. and Mrs. Moore shot dead in their own home, and their young son the only survivor.

“It was definitely a hit,” Barry tells Lance who is scowling around the place. He knows the detective is tense because of the Moore’s connection to his daughter, their being Laurel Lance’s most recent clients in a deposition against Edward Rasmus. “Whoever did it tried to make it look like a burglary gone wrong, but the bodies are too far away from the broken objects to indicate there was a fight, and nothing has actually been stolen.” He can tell because there’s still money and credit cards in both victims’ wallets, checkbooks, change in a jar, a necklace with a single jewel in a case on one nightstand in the master bedroom, and a decently expensive watch on the other. All obvious targets that a burglar wouldn’t have missed.

Barry places the latter two along with a family photograph in a box and takes it with them when they return to the precinct a couple hours later. The seven year-old, Taylor Moore, has been brought there temporarily for protection, so Barry hurries to drop his actual evidence off in his lab, start some tests running although he’s found little if any actual DNA evidence. Once he’s got that started, he heads downstairs.

Into a collection of people he never thought he’d see all together all at once. Lance is off to the side, watching his daughter talking to Taylor about something, while Tommy stands with Oliver of all
people.

“I met Laurel’s clients and their son yesterday, and I felt badly,” Oliver is explaining to the other man.

“You met them?”

“Yeah, when I was—”

“Excuse me,” Barry interjects himself smoothly as he can between the two, which probably isn’t smooth at all as he’s trying to prevent Oliver supposed-to-be-smooth Queen from putting his own foot in his mouth. Even he can tell from the tense set of Tommy’s shoulders and the confusion on his face that bringing up a lunch not-date would be a bad beyond proportions idea. He may not be able to keep himself from making social stumbles, but he can at least save other people when he recognizes it.

Tommy and Oliver both looked surprised, the latter a little amused, by his sudden dive-bomb into the conversation. Though Oliver then clears his throat, eyes darting to Lance who’s yet to notice. Which is fortunate because that’s when Barry remembers to add on the obligatory, “Mr. Queen, Mr. Merlyn.” Ducks his head deferentially because the elite in this town really do get treated like royalty sometimes, and steps past them. The lawyer has just taken Taylor by the hand and is leading him over. “Oh, Ms. Lance?”

She looks at him with that same curiosity that’s been present ever since he approached her about that stupid phone and it always makes him so nervous especially when her father is standing right there, but all she asks is, “Can I help you?”

“I just, um, brought some things from the house. For Taylor.” The little boy in question shrinks back behind her legs in reaction to that, and it is painful to see. That’s him being reflected right back at him, the pain, the anguish, the loss all wrapped up in something so small.

Barry kneels down, like he remembers Joe—Detective West, Iris’ dad only to his mind back then—had done, puts a gentle smile on his face. “Hey Taylor. My name’s Barry, I’m a CSI. That means I help the police catch criminals.”

“Like the one that took away my mom and dad?” The boy’s voice is small, but he’s talking. He nods. “Yeah. Him, the one who took away my mom, and all the other bad people like that. But you know, even if it takes a really long time, even if it feels like they’ve got away, they can’t ever take away everything.” Barry opens up the lid of the box, shows him the contents.

Taylor’s face lights up if for just a brief moment. He reaches out, plucks up the necklace in its case. “That’s my mom’s! And my dad’s!” The watch is the next to be taken out. “He wears it all day.” Then the smile falters. “Wore it all day.”

“Well now you can,” Barry tells him. “And that way they’re always with you.” He helps Taylor slip the watch on over his wrist, tightens it best he can. He’s hoping it works, having no previous experience. They’d never let him keep anything of his dad’s. The watch is still loose, but if Taylor’s careful it won’t slip off. Then he passes over the photograph, which the boy clutches to him with the necklace case. “You’re never really going to be alone.”

Taylor watches him with wide eyes, then nods. The boy looks up when Laurel Lance places a hand on his shoulder, and is able to timidly return her smile.
Then she looks at him. “Well, thank you, Barry. That was really thoughtful of you. Tommy, Taylor’s coming home with us tonight.”

It’s about then that he realizes that was a slightly larger audience than he really wanted. Lance, at least, is still off a few paces talking to Hilton, but Tommy and Oliver were both just behind him. The former doesn’t pay him too much mind, just moves around to grab Taylor’s things. The latter is watching him, not with pity. It’s just…soft.

“You got those?” Tommy asks the boy, nodding at his parents’ belongings. Taylor nods. “Ok.” Oliver snaps his gaze back to the couple taking the seven year-old in. “Well, if you need anything—”

“We’ll be fine,” Tommy cuts him off, not quite looking at Oliver as he starts leading Taylor away.

“Thank you,” Laurel Lance adds for her boyfriend before heading out with them.

“Hey, it’s not just you. They’re not going to be able to have any visitors while he’s in their custody,” Barry points out. Oliver nods but looks unconvinced, even as he reaches down to give Barry a hand up. He’s just opened his mouth to try something else when—

“Bear!” Iris is framed in the doorway of the squad room, looking elated, and she drops her suitcase to run over and throw her arms around him. He stumbles back a couple steps at the force of it, hand slipping from Oliver’s, and it takes him a moment to reciprocate. Barry spots Joe in the background—bending over to pick up Iris’ suitcase along with his own—Oliver in the foreground—expression a baffled and silently blatant Bear?—and his face is turning red from something other than the fact that Iris is squeezing him to death for once.

“Iris, hey,” he says, feeling surprised and more than a little panicked. “I thought you guys were going to call me.”

“We thought we’d save you a trip,” it’s Joe who answers, waiting for Iris to pull away before wrapping him up in another tight hug that he manages to enjoy by squeezing his eyes shut and pretending a bunch of his coworkers and Oliver aren’t here right now. Then the detective pulls back, grips him by the shoulders, and gives him a long, searching look. “Now how’re you holding up?”

“Joe, I’m fine,” he responds almost automatically.

Iris cuts in again, a hand rubbing up and down his arm and the concern almost shining in her eyes. “We were so worried when we got the call. It was crazy, we almost didn’t believe it, but then they said you were in the hospital.”

“Well I’m ok now,” he does his best to reassure with a smile, gestures around with an arm. “Back at work.”

“Doing a pretty good job of it, too,” is the unexpected addition of Lance. Barry figures they’ve probably drawn most of the attention in the room, but it’s surprising to see the grizzled man vouch for him like that as he walks up to shake Joe’s hand. “Detective Quentin Lance, we spoke on the phone.”

“I remember,” says Joe. “Detective Joe West. It was good of you to call. I worry about Barry up here by himself sometimes.”

“I understand that, yeah. I’m here and I can’t even keep my own daughter’s nose out of trouble most days. These kids, I tell you.”
“You’ve got that right.”

“Oh no,” Barry murmurs, taking a couple steps back and shaking his head from side to side. This cannot be happening.

“Come on, you can’t fault them for being cop dads,” Iris scolds, bumping his shoulder with her own. “Not when you worried us all like that.”

He ducks his head for the second time that day, scuffs his shoe. “I’m really sorry about that, Iris.”

“Well, it’s not really your fault. Still can’t believe some psycho decided to attack my Bear. But maybe you can make it up to me with a tour. Dad’s probably going to end up swapping stories around here, so unless you’ve got something that can’t wait—oh my God!”

She’d turned as she was speaking to the person Barry had been standing with when the Wests had come in, probably to apologize for interrupting. Except that person is Oliver, Oliver Queen to be precise, who is still here. Why is he still here? In fact, why did he have to pick today of all days to be here, like he came by just to watch Barry be embarrassed by his family?

“You’re— you’re—” Iris is floundering almost as badly as he usually does, grabbing Barry’s arm for some kind of support, and he can’t help a little smirk at that. He can’t imagine what her reaction would be if he were able to tell her just how well he knows Oliver.

Instead, he gives the unnecessary introduction, “Iris, this is Oliver Queen.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Miss West,” Oliver says, a picture perfect billionaire with a smile that is so totally fake he ought to be insulted on Iris’ behalf. But she looks like she’s about to faint so he guesses it works.

“Mr. Queen was just here about some information in a case we’re working on,” he continues, giving Oliver the opportunity he’s probably been looking for to excuse himself.

The older man blinks, shares a look with him, and plays along. “Right. And since that’s been settled, I think I’ll be going. Enjoy your stay, Miss West.” Then he holds a hand out to Barry. “Mr. Allen.”

Bemused, Barry shakes it, raises an eyebrow at the tight, but not harsh grip and the way it lasts a beat longer than it ought to. “Mr. Queen.” Is this supposed to be conveying some kind of secret message?

Either way, Oliver lets go, gives one last tight imitation of a smile, and turns to leave the station.

“I can’t believe it. You get to work with Oliver Queen,” Iris breathes while they both watch him go. Then she whirls around and smacks Barry on the arm.

“Ow!”

“Oliver Queen! Oh my God, he is even more handsome in person. And his arms are like twice the size of yours.” She holds her hands up wide apart in demonstration, like she’s gripping Oliver’s invisible bicep.

He shifts, a bit uncomfortable, because yeah, maybe, but, “I’m working on it.”

“Barry, did you see him? I mean, I could stare at him all day.”

And he feels himself turning a bit red in the face at her words as he, maybe a little tersely, replies, “Ok, can we maybe stop talking about how attractive Oliver Queen is? At least at my workplace?”
Not even Felicity expects him to put up with that and she’s stared at a shirtless Oliver all day with him.

But Iris just looks at him smug, takes him by the arm and steers them out of the precinct for that tour he’s giving her. “So you admit he’s attractive?” She presses as soon as they’ve reached the end of the block.

“I—yeah, objectively, I mean,” Barry’s apparently resigned himself to this conversation, and so scrambles to find some sort of way of describing the man. “He’s…tall, with the muscles. The stubble works for him. And his eyes are, they’re just blue and—” He makes the mistake of glancing down at Iris, who is watching him with an absurd expression growing on her face. “That didn’t sound very objective,” he realizes.

She shakes her head. “No it did not. Barry—”

“I was just trying to see it from your point of view, like not why I find him attractive, which I don’t—”

“—is there something you haven’t been telling me?” She’s continuing over his frantic excuses. Iris gives him the same searching look that he’s seen from Diggle or Felicity when he’s said something just like this…stared at Oliver too long.

And he realizes, so abruptly he stops in his tracks, that since she’s gotten here there’s been surprise, embarrassment, happiness, irritation, teasing, discomfort—a whole spectrum of emotions. But the one thing that’s been absent, when before it’s been ever-present in all the time he’s spent with her since they were kids, is that all-consuming devotion, that love that he’s held secret in his heart, thought it would always remain his even if he never breathed it to a soul.

How could he not have noticed? He doesn’t feel like it’s gone, just…gone from Iris.

“Barry? Barry,” Iris says. He feels like his head’s spinning, and he shakes it to clear the thoughts away.

“You, um,” he stops, swallows because his mouth has run dry. “You wanna see the Rockets’ stadium? They just remodeled it two years ago, it’s supposed to be state of the art. I’ve never gone, we should see it.” And he takes up her hand and leads her off without another word.

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Oliver is punching and punching at a bag in the foundry for so many reasons. These last couple days, nothing seems to be going right for him. After pledging to help Dig take down Lawton at the trap meetup A.R.G.U.S. had arranged for the sniper, Tommy had finally reached out to him. The attack on Laurel’s apartment by the still-unknown hitman was going to force his friends into protective custody, but his best friend since childhood had suggested instead a temporary move into the Queen Mansion, fully aware that he was placing himself under Oliver’s—the Hood’s—protection. Trusting him.

So he’d had a choice when Felicity discovered Rasmus was trying to flee the country. Go after him and prove Tommy’s trust, or deliver on his commitment to Dig. Diggle was a capable soldier and there would be a team of A.R.G.U.S. agents there as well. No one was going after Rasmus.

He’d gambled, and though his endeavor had succeeded, he’d lost so much more. Deadshot got away and he could tell, this time Diggle is furious with him. Understandably. He’d been betrayed, much as it pains Oliver to think to himself.
He won’t be apologizing for it aloud any time soon, however, not when Diggle had accused him, “You know you say Tommy was your reason, but I think it’s got a whole a lot more to do with Laurel. How you’re still trying to hang onto her because it’s easier.”

“Easier? Than what, Diggle?” He’d demanded.

“You already know what, Oliver,” Diggle had snapped back. “But you’d be damned and damn everyone else before you admitted it.” The former soldier had stormed out after that. Felicity had watched him go with wide eyes before looking to him.

“Something to say, Felicity?”

“Nothing you want to hear,” the blonde had replied, then grabbed up her purse and left as well.

And Diggle is right. He knows what he’s avoiding, what’s been easier so far to ignore. But the other man wasn’t at the precinct the day she arrived.

Iris West. He’d heard the name once before, when Barry had explained to him that he wasn’t dating Felicity. Why he wasn’t dating Felicity. That’s what he should’ve been more focused on, but it had gotten lost in the immense relief that he hadn’t quite understood then. Relief that Barry wasn’t interested in the blonde IT girl who might otherwise be perfect for him.

But it’s because he’s already interested in this Iris, a dark-haired beauty practically brimming over with happiness to see the scientist. Who grew up with him, probably knows everything about him, doesn’t hesitate to hold him in her arms and say “my Bear”, hers.

Would Dig honestly be saying Oliver should take the chance after seeing that? He is damned.

He slams his fist into the punching bag once more before catching it, leaning into it as he gets his harsh breathing under control. Being here alone with his thoughts is doing nothing for him. He gets changed and heads for home, where he can put on a different kind of mask and avoid some more.

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Joe West would be willing to call himself a patient man. When it comes to dealing with Barry Allen, that sort of quality can be invaluable.

Now he loves the kid, sees him as his own son. But he’s growing a little weary of this whole Starling adventure. Joe knows that the word overprotective might as well be part of his name, but well, can he really be blamed?

He’d left Barry and Iris to their own devices the first afternoon he and his daughter came up to the city. Partly for Barry’s benefit and partly for his own. His fellow detective, Quentin, has been very forthcoming of what he knew about his son’s life here. Barry’s been a good, hard worker, even if he’s tardy more often than not—he remembers telling the Captain back home just that, though downplaying the latter, in his attempt to convince him, please sir, that Barry needed to be hired right away before he changed his mind—but work is about all he does. He never goes out with the other tech specialists or anyone else it seems. And he’s been to the hospital not once, but two times in as many months, the first after a mugging that apparently went very badly.

Which Barry has never brought up with Joe.

“And he said he didn’t see the mugger’s face?” He has to ask Quentin Lance instead. The other man hasn’t been too surprised or judging that Joe doesn’t know these details. Apparently his daughter can also be rather willful at times about keeping things to herself.
“Official statement reads that it was dark in the alley and the culprit wore something over their face.”

“Like a mask?” He checks. “That Hood wears a mask, doesn’t he?” He’s just gotten through reading the report on the Starling County Institute for Mental Health incident, on a favor from one cop to another.

Quentin purses his lips together a moment, shakes his head. “He’s a nut job, I’ll tell you, definitely. Wouldn’t put it past him to save someone’s life then turn around and put them in the ground the next. But your kid would’ve recognized him. We’re all on high alert here to catch this vigilante.”

“And you want Barry’s help, on this task force that’s been set up,” he checks. Quentin nods. “Well, I don’t see much problem with that as long as he’s staying in his lab or at a crime scene after it’s been cleared.” Those were the conditions under which he’d accepted Barry’s choice to become a forensic scientist in the first place, after all.

Quentin Lance looks him straight in the eyes. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Still, he’s worried. It seems like Barry hardly has a life in Starling and he’s distancing himself from the one he could have in Central. Joe can see it in the way his smiles seem less bright and hopeful when he looks at Iris, how he’s constantly checking his phone for work, he says. He seems unhappy, restless, and for some reason has been avoiding spending alone time with Iris like the plague.

He knows that it hasn’t been easy for Barry, feeling this way for Iris all the years they’ve grown up together. It seems like he’s finally given that up, and while Joe’s not going to tell Barry who he can and can’t love, he also doesn’t seem to have filled that absence with anything else. And that also can’t be easy; Barry is the kind of kid who needs love, even if he won’t seek it out for himself.

What he was never shy about searching for before his move, however, also seems to have fallen by the wayside. Joe finds an old folder stuffed full of newspaper clippings and articles about strange phenomena and Nora Allen’s murder in his apartment. It doesn’t look like it’s been touched in weeks. He remembers a time nearly every night when he’d come up the stairs to tell Barry it was time for bed only to find the kid at his desk with these same pages sprawled out across the surface, studying them intently. Trying to solve a crime that had already been solved for years, just not the way a little boy had wanted it to. Has he really given it up? Joe’s surprised to find himself unsure if he feels it a good or a bad thing, because then just what is his son working towards, living for?

It’s his and Iris’ last night in Starling when he decides to bring his concerns up with Barry. He waits till his daughter’s gone to bed—Barry haven given up his room for the duration of their stay—before beginning with, “So, guess it’s been a pretty busy year for you.”

Barry pauses just before he’s about to slide into his sleeping bag. “Yeah, I guess,” he agrees, a bit slow, wary. “Why?”

He shrugs. “Just seems like work, work, work is all you do up here. No friends, no…anything else from what I can tell. Unless you’ve been talking to Iris about it.”

“No,” he says, almost forceful, then grimaces. “I mean, it all moves pretty fast here in Starling. Not a lot of in-between time. You know how it is Joe, you’re a cop.”

Joe gives an acknowledging nod. “Yeah. But at the end of the day sometimes I knock back a few beers with Fred. And I go home to Iris. Who do you spend the rest of your day with, Bear? Cause if you’re really going to stick it out here you need to find somebody. You’re going to burn out if you keep throwing yourself into work or investigating, whether it’s that stuff you used to blog about or the Hood. Or you’re going to get yourself killed alone out there. That’s my real fear, after hearing
about all this—"

“I know, Joe,” Barry snaps, buries his hands in his hair. He’s stressing out, has his teeth clenched and it’s like he’s trying to keep whatever else he wants to say in. Joe just waits and stares. “I have someone- someones, ok? I don’t just—but I can’t—” Barry’s phone rings, and the kid lunges for it on the coffee table, checks the text on the screen. Joe sees his eyes widen momentarily and his face go pale. “I got to go,” his son breathes, grabs up his jacket, and heads for the door.

“Barry—”

“Work stuff, I’ll probably be out late. Don’t wait up!” And then he’s gone, still in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms. Joe shakes his head. Something tells him they’re not going to get a chance to discuss this any further before he and Iris have to return home.

But he hopes Barry wasn’t just trying to lie to him about a someone. Cause clearly someone needs to take care of his kid.

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Barry manages to actually hail a cab for once, gets a strange look when he gives the Verdant as a destination. Then he looks down at his plaid cotton pajama pants. Oh, right.

Luckily he’s got his phone and his wallet which are all he really needs. The latter’s in his jacket and the former is in his hand, still displaying a text from Felicity.

**EMERGENCY** it reads, and then two words he never thought he’d see in one sentence, *Dig quit.*

He almost doesn’t want to believe it. John Diggle has been a member of the team far longer than he or Felicity, has stayed on through each of their brief departures. He’s like their rock, and Barry isn’t quite sure what could possibly make him want out after everything they’ve been through. He’s also not sure what he’s going to find when he gets to the Cave. He has a feeling Felicity’s emergency has more to do with the state this has left their vigilante in, and not any physical danger.

And Barry’s stomach does that uncomfortable flip-flop again at the thought of Oliver. After what he’d let slip to Iris—and himself—her and Joe’s first day here about the billionaire, he’s been nervous to see him again. Because what if it’s true? What if it’s not just objectively that he finds the other man attractive?

It’s Felicity who greets him out back behind the club, gives a little encouraging nod to the door leading down into the Cave. “Aren’t you…?”

“He’s not really talking to me,” Felicity says with a grimace. “I may have made it clear earlier that I was sort-of siding with John on a certain…” she purses her lips, looks him up and down, “…issue. Were you in bed?”

“Um, about to be. But it’s totally cool, you saved me from a way too real conversation with Joe. I mean, I probably should have changed, but—”

“No, no, this is good,” she says with a quick shake of her head. “It’s fine, you look great. Now get in there,” she instructs, moving behind him to give him an encouraging pat on the back and get him moving.

“Alright I’m going, Felicity.”

The mood inside the Cave is far more somber. Oliver is half-sitting, half-leanin on the medical table,
his hands braced on the metal surface and his back to the door, gaze downcast. “She shouldn’t have called you.”

Barry pauses on the last step. “How’d you know I wasn’t Felicity coming back?”

“You’re not wearing heels.”

“Right,” Barry says. “The dead giveaway.” He’s slowly making his way around to get an actual look at Oliver, if only in profile. And the only thing he can find Oliver right now is heartbreaking. From the slump of his shoulders to the tiredness in his eyes he looks defeated. There’s just so much anger and guilt and loss on his face that Barry has to step forward, reach out.

Of course as soon as his fingers even brush Oliver’s arm, the older man shuts as much of his expression down as he can. “I meant it, Barry. The Wests—”

“—were turning in anyway,” he finishes. “And I did say to let me know if there was a problem.”

Oliver’s lips pull into a thin line. “Well, I think Diggle and Felicity have already made it pretty clear I messed up. And I don’t really feel like talking about it if that’s what you’ve been brought in for.” The tone is laced with bitterness and biting sarcasm.

Barry tries not to let his own ire rise in response to that, but it’s hard when the only thing he can think to say is, “I’m not here to be your counselor or your cheerleader, Oliver.”

“Then why are you here?” It seems less insulting when Oliver finally lifts his gaze, gives him an almost incomprehensible look. “I’d have thought you’d be taking the time to spend with her.”

He blinks. The special emphasis on that last word couldn’t have been intentional. “Iris?” He checks, and gets a single nod. Barry sighs. Everything with Iris seems so mixed up right now—mixed up with Oliver—but he can at least try to give the older man an answer that’ll actually help him rather than probably upset him more.

“It’s been good to see her, but I did move here to sort of move on from her. And…all this with you—the mission, I mean—being a secret it’s kind of hard to talk to her about anything. She kind of thinks I’m, um, antisocial now, I guess—which I don’t mind if she does,” he hurries to add when he notices the guilt being upped in Oliver’s expression. “Being antisocial isn’t a bad thing, or it shouldn’t be. It’s not like I even had any other friends before this so I guess it was always sort of true…” He trails off, feeling like he’s maybe said too much and that Oliver might have figured out he’s not actually talking about being antisocial. Oliver’s gaze is almost piercing now and Barry has the fleeting thought that he really is underdressed.

And he’s definitely making this way too much about him, so he does his best to finish off. “I was really lucky that she came up here to see me, but…I guess I understand what you meant about Laurel. Just friends is good.” And Barry is surprised to find it leaves a smile on his face, and he feels lighter than he has in ages, like there’s been a weight lifted off him that’s been with him so long he’s almost forgotten what it’s like not to carry it.

The other man can only seem to muster a grimace in return. He’s quiet for a long time, can’t seem to decide on what to say until, “Dig didn’t seem to see it that way.”

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.”

Oliver opens his mouth, shuts it, then shakes his head. “I thought I didn’t want to do a lot of things before I met you, Barry. One more won’t hurt.”
And that, for some reason, makes his smile all the wider. Barry braces his hands on the table, hops up onto it next to Oliver with a little push. “Then I’m totally here.” He bumps the other man’s shoulder with his own. “Nowhere else I’d rather be.”

He finally gets a smile for that.

**Chapter End Notes**

Finally felt I had to settle the scores on how Oliver and Barry felt about Laurel and Iris, respectively. Especially with how little of the season we have left. Thank you so much for reading, and I’d love to hear any thoughts!
Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much for the continued support and enthusiasm for this fic. Without much further ado, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Iris tries not to sigh as the three of them enter the train station. She and dad had only been able to clear a few days, and those days had flown by far too fast. Leaving Barry all alone again once they board the train for Central.

She’s so worried for her best friend. He seems fine after his ordeal, and he’d certainly tried to be accommodating and attentive to them during their visit. But he’d kept one eye trained on his phone at all times and after that shocking moment outside the precinct when she’d been teasing him into discussing Oliver Queen’s hotness, he’d outright refused to talk to her about it.

Iris feels so stupid. It doesn’t surprise her that Barry seems to be having trouble connecting to people up in Starling, he’s always had trouble connecting with people who aren’t her and her father. But now, she thinks, there’s quite possibly a reason for that beyond his past and his admittedly dorky if also adorable nature.

Why hasn’t she seen it before? He’s always been skittish but willing to talk with her about her various dates or boyfriends—rare in male best friends, she’s always thought him a saint for it. After the unmitigated disaster of Becky Cooper he’s never had another girlfriend. And he’s always refused her attempts to set him up with one of her girl friends or acquaintances.

It wasn’t until he’d started listing off the physical attributes of Oliver Queen, practically about to rhapsodize over the man’s eyes for crying out loud, that the thought finally ever entered her brain: What if Barry’s into men?

Even if he likes both genders, that’s a huge part of him that she’s completely missed out on, disregarded. Some best friend and foster sibling she is, if she can’t even figure that one out without it being handed to her on a silver platter. Thing is, she thinks he’s maybe just realized it, too. And if she knows Barry Allen at all, then she knows he’s freaking out about it, internally at least.

He looks like he barely slept last night, as he draws to a stop a few paces back from the platform. Iris puts on the best smile she can manage and pulls him into a tight hug. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“Me too,” he tells her. “Both of you.” He lets her dad crush him in one of his usual strong embraces as well. “And the hugs,” he huffs out on a laugh, probably the last of his breath.

“You can always come home for a Bear Hug,” her dad says, and Iris has to giggle when Barry makes a face.

“Or even find somebody in Starling to hug,” she hints. “You shouldn’t have to travel six-hundred miles out of withdrawal or whatever. People here probably need them just as much.” Iris reaches out and places a hand on one of his shoulders. “But don’t just forget about us up here, alright? I want to be there for you.”
Barry nods. “Yeah, me too. And I—I think I finally can be, Iris. Whenever you need a friend, just call.”

She has to smile at that. Bear’s too much of a sweetheart for his own good. “Well that goes double for you.”

“Now you be careful, Barry,” her dad takes his turn. “Leave the investigating to Detective Lance and his crew, you hear?”

She and Barry share an amused, if exasperated look at her father’s usual protectiveness, but Barry answers, “Loud and clear, Joe.” Then he checks his watch. “I got to get back to the precinct. Just, uh, shoot me a text to let me know you guys got in alright, ok?”

“Sure, Bear.”

“Miss you!” Iris calls after the long, lanky form of her friend as he’s already making his way back through the station. “Why does it have to be six-hundred miles?”

Her father heaves a sigh, picks up their luggage and starts leading her over to a bench to wait for their train. “You know I wish he was back home too, Baby, but I think he just needs some space to figure himself out.”

Iris gives a snort. “You got that right.”

He gives her a shrewd look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She isn’t a fan of secrets, but this would be the worst way to tell her dad. Particularly since Barry hasn’t even technically ‘told’ her yet. So Iris pulls up the news on her phone for something to do, finds an article about an attack on the Queen Mansion. She wonders if that had anything to do with the case Oliver Queen had been speaking to Barry at the precinct about.

God, she should have got a picture! Then at least she’d be able to determine if his eyes really were that blue. Maybe she can ask Bear to snap one the next time he rubs elbows with the Starling billionaire. He had said just to call if she needed something. And really, it’s not like he wouldn’t mind having one…

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After all this time, Felicity finally feels like she’s accomplishing what she set out to do. Decrypting Harold Backman’s account has been long, strenuous work, but the information it’s given back to her is more than worth it.

Two million dollars deposited by one of the crooked accountant’s clients on December 12th of last year—the day Walter disappeared.

“Yes!” She has to cheer, almost can’t believe it.

“Felicity?” Barry looks up from his workstation. He’s been staying very quiet at her request till now, fiddling with one of the programs on his own computer.

“Sorry. I found something really, really important,” she explains.

Barry smiles, “Well great, I’ll get Oliver.” The older man had gone up to check on the Verdant and probably do some actual managing things since he was just waiting on her. She doesn’t wait very long, however, as not a minute later Barry returns sans Oliver, making sure to close the door out to
the club behind him without a sound. “Actually, Felicity, you’re going to have to go get him.”

“Why?”

“He’s talking to Laurel,” he explains, expression pained. “I can’t let her see me.”

“Right,” she says in comprehension. “Don’t want her to find out about Oliver’s affairs—the vigilante kind, I mean! Not you, you’re not an affair. He’s not even dating Laurel anyway, so it wouldn’t count.”

Barry is speechless, a hand coming up to his forehead and cheeks a bright pink color, like he can’t believe her.

“I’ll go get Oliver,” she decides, hurrying past him up the stairs.

Oliver is at the bar with Laurel Lance herself sitting on the other side. They’re talking quietly about something. Felicity clears her throat. The two of them turn to her, Oliver expectant and Laurel bewildered.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Wow, maybe it is like an affair. Felicity can’t help but think, one downstairs, one up. She hopes Oliver makes the better choice, unlike what happened when it came between Tommy and Dig.

“This is Felicity. She’s setting up my internet router,” Oliver introduces, lying more smoothly to Laurel than he ever did to her.

“And I need to show Oliver something very important related to it,” she picks it right up, and the two of them move to leave the lawyer behind.

In the Cave, Barry stands by her chair studying her screen. “So why do you have a single deposit of two million dollars singled out?”

“The amount isn’t the important part,” she tells him, marching over and taking her rightful place in front of the monitors. “It’s the date. December 12th of last year,” she says over her shoulder to Oliver.

She thinks she can see the gears turning in his brain as he casts his mind back. “That’s the day Walter disappeared.” She nods enthusiastically.

“So, what, you think Backman’s client might have been paid to have Mr. Steele kidnapped?” Barry checks.

“Uh-huh. After all this time,” and she has to hesitate for a moment, “could Walter still be alive?” Barry looks torn between comforting her as a friend and giving her an honest answer based on his knowledge of criminology.

Oliver looks grim, but says, “Either way, back-trace the account.”

She gets the client’s name after a minute. Dominic Alonzo. An illegal casino owner who apparently has a private army.

“It’s too bad there’s not someone else we could call for help,” she says pointedly, which amuses Barry but irritates Oliver.

“We can do this on our own.”
“You mean, Felicity and I can do this on our own,” Barry pipes up, causing Oliver to look at him sharply.

“What?”

But she catches on. “Yep, looks like we’re going gambling tonight.”

“Absolutely not,” the vigilante states, in that tone meaning no argument.

Which they completely disregard. “I can count cards,” she puts in. “It’s all probability theory and mathematics. Have you met me? Bottom line—I know my way around a casino.”

“Felicity, I’m not letting you walk—”

“I’ll be there, too. I can act like her partner. Or, if you don’t want Felicity going in there, I can just do it,” Barry offers.

“No.” If anything, it’s even more emphatic. Which gives Felicity an idea.

“I mean, I’m not crazy about the plan,” she feels like she has to clarify, angling secretly for her own agenda now, “but with just the three of us, it’s the only one we’ve got. So if Barry can get access to Alonzo’s computer—”

Probability-wise, it was always a high chance Oliver would take the bait. “He’s not going in there. Barry, you’re not,” he adds when the younger man opens his mouth to protest. “You hear me?”

For the first time in possibly ever, Barry actually struggles and steps away when Oliver tries to reach for him. “Do you hear you?” The scientist tries to keep any irritation in check as he says, “It’s an undercover mission. Even if it goes south, I could be ok until you can get there. You’ve been teaching me.”

Oliver shakes his head, eyes cast to the floor, with a rueful, bitter smile that looks awful. “See, this is exactly what I meant before. You are not ready.” His voice has turned hard and firm, and Felicity worries that maybe she miscalculated provoking this familiar argument, even in the interest of helping them, Walter, and Diggle.

But Barry only sounds plaintive and weary of it when he asks, “Am I ever going to be?” Oliver looks up, somehow guilty and uncompromising all at the same time, and the two of them stare at each other for a long moment.

Felicity wonders if in that moment they even remember she’s right here, but at the least it seems they’re going to avoid an all-out fight when Barry sighs. “Look Oliver, you said you can’t attack it as the Hood by yourself. There’s no way you can walk in there without it being suspicious. Somebody has to. And if you don’t want to talk to Dig, fine, I’m not going to make you.” Then he, too, gets a stubborn light in his eye, sets his stance. “But if you don’t, then you’re just going to have to let me do this.”

Oliver’s lips press together in a thin line, his fists clench, and he fixes the scientist with a look as piercing as one of his arrows for presenting him with this ultimatum: swallow his pride, or put Barry in danger.

She can’t help a smile along with the growing feeling she knows which one Oliver will pick.

When he turns on his heel and makes for the steps, Barry looks baffled. “Oliver? Where—” the door slams, “Where’s he going?” The younger man asks her.
Felicity has to turn back to her computers, knowing if she looks at his oblivious face she’s going to start laughing. “To talk to Dig. Good job, Barry, you really hit him where it hurts.”

“Well I don’t know,” he replies with a chuckle. “Anyway it was really the both of us.”

She just shakes her head.

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John doesn’t even try to hide his surprise when he opens his door to Oliver. “Wasn’t expecting to see you here so soon.”

“You shouldn’t have had to wait,” Oliver admits, more to his shoes than John, before looking up at him. “Can I come in?”

He waits a beat, considering, before pulling the door open all the way and stepping aside. “So, Oliver, what did you need me for?” He gets right to the point as he shuts it.

Oliver winces, but says, “I need your help, Diggle, but that’s not all I came here for.” He waits for John to face him fully, then takes a readying breath. “I shouldn’t have taken everything you’ve already done for me for granted. I should have kept my promise to you, and even when I didn’t I should have informed you of the change of plans. I’m sorry.” He pauses, seems to think over how he wants to conclude. “I’m also not going to stop trying to make things right with Tommy. He’s my oldest friend. But Dig, you’ve- you’ve been there for me through all of this. You’re my best friend. And in future I’ll try to remember that.”

John has to stare for a long moment. Felicity had texted him a few nights ago after he’d left the foundry, asking if he’d wanted to talk, that Barry was talking to Oliver, and he’s tempted to ask how much of what the other man’s just said comes from the scientist.

The only way of proving the vigilante’s sincerity is to question him on the one part he’s left out, the one part John knows he never would have spoken with Barry about. “And about Laurel?” He asks, approaching it from that angle because, well, he guesses he still can’t help making it easier for the troubled man before him.

Oliver heaves a sigh. “You were right. About the way that I’ve handled things with her hurting other people. Tommy wants to break up with her. He said something the other night, and…”

“You think it’s got something to do with you?” Oliver frowns, but nods. “And what happens if they do break up, Oliver?”

“It’ll be a mistake,” comes the candid answer. “Tommy and Laurel are right for each other in a way Laurel and I never were. They make each other better. Even if I wanted to try again, I’d only end up hurting her.” There’s a heaviness to the words, a weight of closure to them, and he knows Oliver has not only let the lawyer go at last, but realized he’s fallen out of love with her.

Now that he has, though, there’s no reason love should remain so bleak a prospect for him. “Doesn’t mean there’s not somebody you wouldn’t hurt, Oliver,” John observes. “And stubborn as you are I think you know that, and that somebody’s why you don’t even want to try with Laurel.” Oliver says nothing and he suppresses a sigh. It’s honestly an accomplishment he’s gotten this much out of him. And John wishes there wasn’t the ingrained preference against just talking about this that’s made them dance around the issue for so long.

But old habits are hard to break. He offers something of an alternative topic instead. “I’m guessing that somebody’s also got something to do with why you’re here now.”
And the other man’s grateful and eager enough to move on that he doesn’t seem to realize the first
word out of his mouth might as well be a confession. “Barry is determined I let him, Felicity, or the
both of them infiltrate Dominic Alonzo’s casino. We’re almost certain he has a lead on Walter.”

John digests that bit of information with a healthy amount of shock. It’s been months, long past the
usual point of hoping, but he thinks he can see the real dilemma that Oliver is faced with. Oliver,
however, seems to misread his silence. “I know it seems like I’m prioritizing my family and personal
missions over yours, again. I’m asking for your help now not for them, but for the team. If I could
handle this mission on my own I wouldn’t even be bothering you.”

And he knows that the vigilante is really here as a last resort, that he had to humble himself for some
reason or other, but he’s just scraping the depths of Oliver’s desperation as the man continues, “But I
can’t take on all of Alonzo’s men as the Hood, and if Felicity’s going to get the information for us
someone has to slip a bug onto Alonzo’s office computer.” Oliver is pacing a little path back and
forth in front of the couch that might become permanently tramped into his carpet if he keeps it up. “I
can’t be that person.”

“For obvious reasons,” John acknowledges, gaining a nod in return.

“Felicity would do anything to find Walter, even this,” the worry is already increasing in his tone as
he talks about their blonde IT expert of a teammate. “Her only field experience is the Dodger case.”
They both remember just how that turned out.

“But Barry’s volunteered,” John guesses. “She’s probably willing to turn things over to him.”

“Well I’m not,” Oliver snaps as he comes to a stop, voice rough with some barely controlled
emotion. Past the frustration, John can see there’s a helplessness, a real fear in his eyes. “Not after
Webb. I can’t—” He cuts himself off, takes a shuddering breath as he looks him in the eye. “John, I
need your help. Please.”

And in the face of such a raw plea John finally works up the resolve to help Oliver in a way the man
hasn’t asked by advising, “You know, you should really tell him.” Oliver looks away, closes his eyes
for a moment, but it’s a far cry from his don’t-know-what-you’re-talking-about attitude of just a few
weeks earlier. And it’s not a no.

So he adds, “I promised I’d protect them. Now what’s our plan for Alonzo?”

Deadshot is still at large and the likelihood Oliver will actually take his advice in regards to a certain
forensic scientist any time soon is small, but at the least the two of them finally know where they
stand. On everything.

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Oliver feels trapped in the hospital, would love nothing more than to go back to the foundry and sit
in the dark for another long while. But his family needs him here.

What kind of family is it, though, when his own mother would do this to him? To Thea? To Walter?

He and Dig had worked out a strategy in which the former soldier had entered Dominic Alonzo’s
casino and caused a scene, drawing a number of the armed men in the illegal establishment’s employ
and allowing the Hood to make his own attack during the diversion. They’d worked their way
shortly into Alonzo’s office where he’d interrogated the man, only to receive the answer that Walter
had been killed. The sharp gasp from Felicity heard through his com had been heart wrenching
enough without his own disillusionment. He’d had the thought that he shouldn’t have been hoping,
after all this time of nothing.

Then he had returned home to deliver the terrible news to his mother and sister. Thea had been appropriately distraught, but his mother had been almost erratic, alternating between denial and rage as she’d left the house. He’d had Diggle trail her, not wanting to leave Thea alone with her grief, again, if he could help it.

But his friend had called him shortly after, telling him there was something he needed to hear at the foundry right away. When he’d gotten there, it had been to listen to a recorded conversation between his mother and Malcolm Merlyn of all people. They’d both admitted their culpability in this still-unknown Undertaking, and in Walter’s kidnapping.

Diggle had had to call Felicity and Barry back in. Oliver had been lost in his shock. His own mother…he thinks he’s still partly in shock even now.

But he’d given himself something to do when the two had arrived, tasking Felicity with locating the place Merlyn had called to ascertain Walter’s continued existence. Then he’d left before anyone could try talking to him.

Rescuing Walter had been surreal. He’d wanted to feel happy, relieved about this moment. But it had been tainted by the fact that the home he was returning Walter to was one full of lies, and the people who had placed the man in this ordeal in the first place.

And the lies continue as he has to rush to the hospital as Oliver Queen, put on a smile for his family and act like nothing is wrong, nothing at all, as his mother talks about being all together again and Merlyn himself has the gall to show up. All a veiled attempt to determine if Walter would be able to trace the crime back to him, Oliver is sure.

He meets the man out in the hall while he is wishing Felicity hadn’t left so soon because he really is starting to need somebody here, but then a voice calls out, “Ollie!”

“Excuse me,” he says to Merlyn, finding it impossible to even try a smile, and just ducks around the man and walks to Laurel.

“Is Walter ok? I saw it on the news,” the lawyer tells him.

He tries to focus on the good, because, “Yeah.” Walter is at least back, in safe hands at Starling General. He can’t imagine Laurel’s come all this way just to ask this, though, and he just manages to suppress a sigh as he invites a discussion he’s probably not in the right frame of mind for. “How are you and Tommy doing?”

She looks at least a little apologetic, but still presses on with, “That’s the thing. Apparently it’s you and Tommy. You and me, actually. I talked to him yesterday, and the reason he wants to break up is because he thinks you and I still belong together.”

Oliver feels his eyebrows rise to near his hairline. Another bombshell he wasn’t expecting in these last few hours. The last time they’d talked, his old friend had said something about how if Laurel knew he was the Hood things would be different. But Oliver had had no idea Tommy had felt that sufficient enough reason to end things.

“He doesn’t—he can’t really mean that, Laurel. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy, but Tommy’s got the wrong idea. He must think there’s something unresolved between us.”

“Is there?” She’s looking at him intently, seeming wary yet intrigued to hear his response.
He thinks he’s glad Dig made him talk about this before because it is somehow easier the second time to definitively say. “No. Not for me.”

And he’s glad, too, to see she now looks truly relieved. “Then could you talk to him for me? Say that you and I are over, that you’re not still in love with me? That there’s someone else?” His surprise must show, for she gives a smile as she continues, “I meant what I said, Ollie. You really have changed. And I’d like to think now that it’d take you more than a few casual hookups to get over me.” Her smile grows just a bit wider. “I’m glad. You know, I never thought when you first came back that I’d say something like this, but you really deserve to find someone right for you.” It morphs into something more wry before she adds, “So don’t screw it up.”

Laurel turns and starts walking away. He manages to get his throat unstuck when she’s halfway down the hall. “I’ll talk to Tommy.”

She flashes a grateful smile over her shoulder, then heads around the corner. Oliver leans against the wall. If Laurel only knew, would she really feel the same? Diggle has made it clear there’s little difference to him, and at times he can’t help feeling overwhelmed by the amount of acceptance and support he gets from the other man, even about something like this. He supposes, though, that it really only matters how one certain individual feels about it.

As if summoned by the thought, Barry’s voice comes from behind him. “Oliver?”

He turns. The younger man is standing there, a few paces from Walter’s hospital room, but he’s not likely to go in, nor should he really. “What are you doing here?”

Barry looks behind himself briefly, just a slight bit of nerves showing, before he’s meeting Oliver’s questioning gaze again. “I know I probably shouldn’t be. Guess I thought I’d find you out here. And it just didn’t seem right that you had to be here alone, after everything we found out.”

“I’m not alone, Barry,” he points out, giving a nod to the door. They can both make out the murmur of voices, his mother and Thea and Walter in this moment still a unit even if it’s all false.

Barry takes a couple steps toward him. “Yes, you are.”

He can’t really dispute it. And there’s not much point pretending when the other man can see right through it. Can see everything, it seems, except what everyone else does and Oliver’s not sure if he’s thankful or resentful for it. So he takes a step forward of his own. “No more than usual.”

The scientist takes in a deep breath, then that final step left in between them as he lifts his arms. He has Oliver in a hug before he can react, tight and warm and strong. So much more so than he’s been giving the other man credit for. With his chin just barely brushing over Barry’s shoulder, it’s times like these he’s forced to recognize the other man is just a little taller, even if he’s slighter. He can easily circle his arms around the small of his back, remembering he can give as well as receive, and that it makes it all the better when he does.

He’s closed his eyes, but they snap open again at the feeling of a breath on his ear and neck. “You looked like you needed one,” Barry says, soft and low. Purely unintentional, he knows, but oh does it make him think of just what—who—he needs. In his arms right this moment.

_You should really tell him_, he recalls, and it’s dizzying how much he wishes he just would. But it’s all wrong; Barry’s here trying to help him stay together while his mother puts on a show for the world in the next room how happy she is that her husband’s been returned from the kidnapping she was complicit in, ordered by the father of his oldest friend who probably also was the one who had _his_ father effectively killed via the sabotaged _Queen’s Gambit_. He can’t bring himself to start such a
conversation with all of that tainting it, just like it’s soured Walter’s homecoming.

So he pulls back after a time, he doesn’t know how long, and says in a voice made rough with all that he won’t, “I really did. Thank you.” Barry beams at him, for him, and he thinks, he has enough lies in his life already. Maybe he could be free of this one.

But over Barry’s shoulder he sees Thea poke her head out into the hall, spotting the two of them. “Ollie?”

Barry glances back, and he imagines the scientist probably gives her a polite smile because she returns it before her eyes return to him. Oliver had dropped his arms from the other man, but he lifts a hand to squeeze his shoulder once, getting Barry to refocus on him. “You going in to work?”

“Yeah, just to put in a few hours. I’ll come by the club after, if you want.” Oliver nods, then steps around Barry and rejoins his sister in the doorway.

“Who was that?” Thea questions. “Another friend?”

“Yeah,” he lies.

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Barry had lied. He isn’t going back to work. He probably should, since he’s on call, but well, with everything they’ve learned from this mission to find Walter Steele it’s already hard enough to concentrate. That’s why he’d stopped by the hospital, on an impulse and a need to see to it that Oliver was ok—as ok as could be hoped, anyway—in the wake of all this, if only for just a moment. Even if that was a vain hope.

And then he’d had to go and hug him. Barry hadn’t been able to help it. Just seeing the other man out there in the hallway, looking so lost and lonely, had pulled at something in him to do something about it, and he’d thought of Iris and her advice to find somebody in Starling, and it’s really just so ridiculous and idiotic of him to finally stop crushing on someone so far out of his league as Iris only to immediately start crushing on someone unthinkably out of his league and unattainable like Oliver.

Really though, crushing? That’s not fair to Iris, not even a fraction of what he used to feel for her. The idea that he’s fallen just as far for the other man in such a short time, however, is almost too frightening to admit even inside his own head.

Except the older man had responded, and not just like he was humoring Barry. Like it meant something. Is he just imagining that?

He doesn’t know what to think. Talking to somebody seemed like a good idea. But Felicity and Dig are far too preoccupied with the little information they’ve got on the Undertaking, as he should be. Joe or Iris would demand all the details were he to open up to one of them, details he can’t and isn’t prepared to give.

There’s only one person in the world right now who can be there just for Barry, who will take anything he gives him and never expect more. Who might still love him anyway.

He’s so accustomed to the routine that the guard simply stands against the wall and lets him walk over to the chair. It’s only a few moments’ wait before the man he’s come to see is led into the room on the other side of the Plexiglas window that’s separated them since his childhood.

Henry Allen picks up the phone on his end as he takes his. “Hey, Slugger. Everything ok?” It’s only been a couple days since his last visit, after all.
Barry swallows once, but it’s a bit late to lose his nerve now. “Hey, Dad…I need some advice.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Finally managed to work Henry into the story! Felt bad neglecting him for so long. Ok, so Team Arrow knows Malcolm and Moira are behind the Undertaking, and will soon be taking steps to figure out just what that is! Things are coming to a head as well between Barry and Oliver, but just how is the Undertaking going to impact that? Moving quickly into the season finale now, guys. Hope you're excited as I am. Thanks so much for reading, and I'd love to hear any and all feedback!
Chapter Notes

Ok, so a bit later than I was planning to update, but I'm happier with the end result so hopefully that makes up for it. It's also super long, so fair warning. Thanks so much for all the feedback and encouragements, guys, and enjoy the chapter!

These past few months, Henry hasn’t been sure what to think. He’d been conflicted for a long time when Barry had moved to Starling. On the one hand, it presented something of a fresh start for his son, a brand new city where not many people had heard of him, his family, the shame of it all. He could maybe get out there and really live his own life.

But on the other hand, for almost the first year Barry’s life had seemed to consist of work, visits to him, and his ongoing search for finding the man he held responsible for tearing their family apart. Henry had tried to convince him to give that up, not waste any of his time on him, but Barry had remained firm.

Until reports of this Hood, a sort of wacko for justice according to the inmates who’d been sent here due to him—the lucky ones that hadn’t been put in the ground—and Barry had seemed fascinated. He’d talked to Henry about his various theories and speculation on just who the man was, why he did what he did. Then just as suddenly he’d stopped. He hadn’t gone back to obsessing over Nora’s case, but had also turned surprisingly quiet about this vigilante figure.

He’d been able to tell Barry had been keeping things from him, holding back, but he’d tried his best to be patient and understanding. Even if he’d been growing increasingly concerned as Barry racked up not one, but two visits to the hospital in two months alone. It had been hard to dismiss the thoughts of what if Barry had gotten himself into some sort of trouble? He’d only had the hope that his son would come to him whenever he felt ready.

And much to his relief it seems that time is now. Barry’s here, asking for advice, and Henry tries not to sound too eager as he prompts, “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

Barry takes another anchoring breath. “Well, it’s kind of complicated. See, there’s sort of someone I—I don’t know, I guess I like them?”

Henry feels an eyebrow raise. “Is it Iris?” This isn’t exactly the conversation he’d expected to have, but he supposes it makes sense; the Wests had just come up to see his son. And even if Barry had been bringing up Joe’s daughter less and less during his visits, Henry had known for a while how he’d felt. He’d been debating encouraging his son to work up the nerve to approach the girl, but perhaps seeing her after so long has been enough to finally feel ready to make that leap.

But Barry goes a bit pink, and rigid in his seat. “You knew about that?”

Henry has to chuckle. “Barry, I’m your father. You think I don’t know how you love her?” But at the grimace that gets, and registering the past tense that Barry had used, he amends, “Or is it loved now?” Barry nods, a bit somber, and it tugs at his heartstrings. Falling out of love can sometimes be hard. He knows. He’d been fortunate enough, however, to meet Nora so soon in his life and have all
that be swept away.

And apparently, Barry’s found someone else in much the same way. Henry gets back on track, asking, “But there’s someone else.”

Barry nods again. Then launches into, “I met them, sort of, back in January, and I know it hasn’t even been half a year and they’re way past complicated, but I—”

“Woah, Barry,” he says, holding up his free hand. “I’m not necessarily a stickler for grammar, but can we drop all the ‘they’ and ‘them’? Making it hard to wrap my head around this.” He has some inkling as to why Barry’s been trending towards something more neutral, but his son just about confirms it when he tenses up, drops his gaze to his lap. “Is it a ‘him’, maybe?” He probes, gentle as he can.

Barry’s lip still trembles as he swallows and nods for a third time. Then he croaks, “I’m sorry, dad.”

“Sorry?” It comes out sharper than he intended and he has to watch Barry brace both elbows on the little table space in front of their window, scrub a hand over his face and wipe at his eyes. “Hey.” He reaches out a hand and—it’s one of the only times in his life Henry’s wanted to curse because damnit can’t anybody see he needs to be able to reach out, hold his son?—presses his palm flat to the glass. “Barry, look at me.”

Barry does and, Lord, the tears in his eyes. He can’t stand it. Henry nods to his hand at the glass, and after a moment Barry lifts his own up to meet it, looking confused and ashamed and hopeful all at once.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. Anything. You’re my son, Barry, and there’s nothing that can change the fact that I love you. Not losing your mother, not being in prison, and certainly not you finding somebody to care for.”

His son has to take his hand down to wipe at his eyes again, but he places it right back up like he needs that contact, separate though it still is. “I think I—I think I really like him, dad. But it really is complicated.”

That’s the third time Barry’s said it, which doesn’t exactly bode well. “Does he know how you feel?”

Barry shakes his head. “I don’t think so. I don’t even think he- he likes other men. And there’s just so much going on right now.” He heaves a sigh, one filled with worries and frustrations Henry has a feeling he won’t be told about today. “And I don’t want to lose him as a friend.”

“Barry,” Henry says. “You should tell him if you want to. I watched you struggle for years with your feelings for Iris. Do you really want things to end the same way?”

His son looks miserable at the very idea. “No.”

He puts a gentle smile on his face. “Then you need to stop being afraid of losing, of being alone. It’s your life, but it’s only going to go the way you want if you do something about it.” Barry’s staring at him, some mixture of awe and trepidation on his face. “If you don’t think it’s the right time, then it’s not the right time. But you shouldn’t keep putting it off for a ‘right’ time, Barry. When you’re ready, that’s the right time.”

He wishes he knew more, wishes he could be certain that this will end well for his son. But love often runs many risks. Barry does manage a watery smile for him, however, and his voice is more steady when he replies. “Thanks, dad.”
“I’m always here for you, son. I love you.” He’s pushing his hand into the glass with all his strength, and he thinks or imagines he can feel just a bit of pressure from Barry pushing back.

“I love you, too.”

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Oliver doesn’t know what he feels for his mother any more. He wishes it could be as simple as hatred or disgust, but a small part of him still believes what she’d said, about being vulnerable, about wanting to protect him and Thea. But how could she have let it get so far?

Talking to her was never a viable plan. She was too good at dodging his questions, and as Felicity had so helpfully reminded—“Last time the Vigilante paid your mom a visit, you got shot, and Barry got to play doctor with you!” leaving Barry spluttering and red-faced, Felicity falling over herself trying to recover from the slip, and Diggle giving him an amused look at his expense—approaching her as the Hood wouldn’t have worked either. Not without leverage.

Which is why he’s now limping as he enters the foundry just behind Diggle. Felicity and Barry both look up, anxious to learn what his mother had told them, and their faces both morph into horrified expressions. He has to wonder if he really looks that bad.

“Oh God!” Barry’s rushing across the room to get to him, hands fluttering onto his shoulders like he’s afraid of causing more damage.

Felicity has made a similar run to Dig, though she doesn’t reach out to the man and simply demands, “I thought you were going to pull your punches!”

“I did,” is Dig’s calm answer, and Oliver has to snort. Which somehow hurts.

When he winces, Barry takes immediate notice. “Ok, you get on the table. Felicity, can you get some icepacks?”

“I’m fine,” he disputes before she can make a move. “I need you to dig up everything you can on Unidac Industries.”

Felicity goes to do as asked after a brief hesitation but Barry, mouth set in a stubborn line, grabs him by the upper arms and starts tugging him over to the medical table. Then the younger man’s gone for just under a minute, which lessens the temptation to get back up. Instead, Oliver listens to the little Felicity can tell him about the small company from where he is. Barry wraps a small towel—probably swiped from the club at some point—around one of the icepacks, takes hold of Oliver’s chin with a hand and turns his head so he can press the pack to his slightly swollen cheek. He can’t deny it feels good, and not just the ice, so he lets his eyes slip shut.

“Oliver, there’s a website claiming the police suspect a copycat archer in the Unidac Massacre,” Felicity suddenly pipes up, effectively taking him right out of that relative peace.

He has to lean back and to the side, breaking Barry’s hold as he asks, “What?”

“Oh, that’s not a rumor,” Barry says. “Lieutenant Pike’s ordered silence about it to the public, but they’re the Dark Archer’s arrows.” When Oliver turns an incredulous look on him, the forensic scientist hastens to add, “I was going to tell you when you and Dig came back, but then you were like this.” He waves a hand at Oliver’s face.

“So the other archer’s working for Merlyn,” Dig surmises.
“Well, he’s the one planning the Undertaking, and probably made those lists,” Barry reasons, which makes Oliver feel a little sick inside that he’s been working off of some tool of Merlyn’s this whole time. “But why would he need to have the people at Unidac killed if they were working for him?”

“He’s tying up loose ends,” Oliver realizes. “Making sure the devastation can’t be traced back to him.”

Barry seems to digest that for a moment, still standing close but with his arms hanging at his sides. “You think that’s what happened to Kevin Chen?” Oliver raises an eyebrow. “There’s still been no word of him, and they were able to get in touch with his daughter and everything. Nobody knows where he is.”

“Might not have just been your parents in on this,” Dig muses. “Maybe Chen got cold feet and tried to bring Merlyn down.” It’s a generous assumption to be made by the former soldier, who until now was rather unfavorably thinking of Chen as just another one of Deadshot’s clients.

“Then he’s probably been eliminated himself,” Oliver concludes, a heavy weight settling in his stomach. The reason Merlyn’s still around to send the copycat archer after people like Chen or the Unidac employees is because he helped to save him that night of the attempted assassination.

“This all would have been a lot simpler if Chen had just gone to the police,” Felicity points out, more than a bit wryly.

“Yeah, well he probably wasn’t too keen on admitting his own guilt,” Diggle replies. “Still, now we got no way of figuring out where this earthquake device is, unless you’re going to have a pointed conversation with Merlyn.” He addresses this to Oliver.

“Or, Merlyn could tell us a different way,” says Felicity. They all look to her and she seems glad to have their undivided attention. “As I keep proving, people keep secrets. Computers don’t.”

When she turns in her chair and pulls up another browser, he thinks he gets the idea. “Felicity, are you hacking into the Merlyn Global mainframe?”

She gives an exaggerated scoff. “No. Hacking is such an ugly word. I’m...okay, yeah, I’m totally hacking into the Merlyn Global mainframe.”

“Somebody really needs to come up with a better word for hacking,” Barry remarks.

And he can’t help some humor even now as he asks, “Why, to make it sound nicer than it is?”

The younger man looks chagrined as he replies. “Well, no. It’s not nice. But just what Felicity does, you know, she’s not mean.”

“Thanks, Barry,” Felicity chirps from her chair without even looking back. “I support the motion for a new word.”

“We’ll come up with something later, Felicity,” Diggle promises. “But we’ve got bigger problems right now.”

“Ok, yeah, I’m on this.” She’s soon lost in her technological world.

With nothing else to do his eyes invariably find the scientist. “Barry?” When he looks, Oliver points to his still battered face. “Am I cleared?”

“Oh. Um, no,” the other man decides, putting the icepack to the other side of his head where it’d hit
off the floor. Barry’s touch is still light and soft, like where the other man’s knee brushes the inside of his thigh.

There’s no mention made by either of them that Oliver could just as easily take hold of the icepack and let Barry move away from him. Dig moves to sit beside Felicity, turning his back to the pair of them, which he’s more than a little grateful for.

He closes his eyes again, mostly to just further the illusion of a tiny bit of privacy, particularly as Barry shifts a little closer between the open v of Oliver’s legs to readjust both the icepack and his free hand, fingers tracing over Oliver’s stubble. But he can’t really keep from cracking his eyelids open just slightly, not enough to be noticed, just enough to get a good look at Barry’s face unawares.

The younger man is mostly displaying concern, but there’s a certain…tenderness, he thinks, in his eyes that can’t be overlooked. His cheeks are the faintest pink and his lips are just slightly parted. He’s basically cradling Oliver’s face in his hands, and Oliver has the thought that he might not be so alone in this.

Unfortunately, another negative sounding beep from the computer distracts Barry briefly, breaking that moment. Yet the scientist’s expression is imprinted in his mind with perfect clarity.

It’s not long before he’s able to dispense with the now lukewarm icepack, but it longer before Felicity admits defeat in accessing the Merlyn Global mainframe. “Unless I can waltz up to Merlyn’s mainframe directly and plug in my tablet, there’s no way of getting that location.”

He considers for a moment before saying, “Then we waltz.” The whole team looks at him with varying degrees of bafflement.

“You’re very punctual, Mr. Allen.” Barry of course has to make the cheeky remark, nodding to his right leg.

“A bruised hip is not going to put me out of commission,” Oliver states, then raises an eyebrow. “I suppose you still want to see that next?” The scientist’s blush in response is certainly something he wants to see whenever possible, and test now that he suspects the cause.

But by the end of the evening, they’ve all worked out a plan and it goes into execution the next morning. Suited up—in business attire—Oliver enters Merlyn Global headquarters and walks up to the front desk. “Hi, Oliver Queen,” he tells one of the receptionists. “I have an 11:30 with Tommy Merlyn.”

A young man with a dashing smile and green eyes he certainly doesn’t know whatsoever steps up to the desk just to his right and holds out a badge. “Hi, CSI Allen. I’m going to need to see Mr. Thomas Merlyn for police business. I believe he’s the official liaison?”

And a blonde delivery girl he couldn’t have possibly ever met before appears at his left. “I have a super deluxe Big Belly Buster for a Mr. Andrews? I think he’s in security. He a good tipper?”

“You can go on up, Mr. Queen, Mr. Allen,” the receptionist says, then turns to Felicity. “You’ll have to wait a second.”

Oliver isn’t worried, and simply paces himself on his walk to the elevator, as it’ll only take a few seconds for ‘Mr. Andrews’ to confirm the food order. Barry falls into step with him and with things falling into place he’s willing to remark lightly, “You’re very punctual, Mr. Allen.”

Barry shoots him a look, but rises to the bait. “Well, that’s what my friends always say.”

“I’ll bet they do.” The younger man seems caught off guard by his playful comments. But there’s no
mistaking he’s definitely receptive, a certain light in his eyes as he sneaks another glance. It sends a
thrill through Oliver like he hasn’t felt since before the island.

Felicity joins them at the doors, and all three of them get inside. “Hold that!” Some businessman calls
and he has to force himself not to scowl as the man hurries in, an unexpected hindrance. The
newcomer forces him to have to press Barry into the back corner as the man seems intent on
speaking to Felicity. “Where you heading, sweetie?”

He’s pleased to see she barely gives him the time of day. “Nineteen.”

“Too bad, I’m going to thirteen—” and Oliver’s really had just about enough of this, doesn’t want to
put up with it to floor five let alone thirteen, and with a deft move of his hand has knocked the man’s
papers and folder out onto the floor of the lobby. “Damn it!”

The doors shut just after he leaps out. Barry sniggers. “Nice move.”

He grins, takes perhaps a moment longer than he needs to step back from the younger man, give him
just a bit more space, and then turns to Felicity. “Mr. Andrews got his lunch?”

“Yes,” she replies. “One belly buster with benzodiazepine. Hold the mayo.” The dosage, which
Barry had treated the food with himself, will guarantee Dig’s security coworker will be out for the
count through all of this.

Sure enough, their friend’s voice comes through the coms they’re all wearing. “Mainframe’s on
twenty-five, guys. That’s as close as I can get you.” They’ve stopped on the floor where the lower
executive offices—such as the one his childhood friend now occupies—are located. Oliver works the
hatch on the roof open and climbs up, reaching down for Felicity’s arms. She hands her tablet off to
Barry briefly before accepting his help up.

When Oliver leans back down to grab the tablet, Barry gives him a bright grin. “Good luck, guys.”

“See you in a few minutes,” he tells the younger man. He puts the elevator hatch back in place just as
the front doors of it slide open and Barry steps out into the hall. Now the task is to get himself and
Felicity to the special access elevator.

They’ll have to go swinging across the cavern of an empty elevator shaft, which he’s prepared the
other woman for, but she still looks terrified. “Felicity, hold onto to me tight,” he says.

He puts his arm around her and she stammers out, in some attempt to ease her tension he has to
guess, “Now I know what being Barry feels like. During training sessions,” she adds when he looks
at her sharply.

And he’s had the thought before that she probably knows his feelings, but looking right in her eyes
he thinks if anyone would definitively know Barry’s, it’d be her. Tempted as he is to ask, he only
checks, “Ready?”

“Yes.”

They swing over, and soon enough they’ve gotten in the restricted access elevator up to the twenty-
fifth floor with Felicity being only a little shaken to show for it. He reminds her of the strict time limit
they’re on, when to expect him and then leaves for his meeting with Tommy.

Barry stands outside the office when he gets back down to that floor, looks relieved to see him.
Though he only peeks up at him from under his eyelashes and says under his breath with a little
smirk, “Right on schedule, Mr. Queen.”
He remembers telling Barry a long time ago not to call him that. But if he wants to say it like *that* then he’s willing to reconsider. “Did you expect any less?” He lets that good mood carry him through the doorway, hoping it’ll be enough to get him through this conversation.

But it’s long past time the two of them should talk, which he tells a visibly tense Tommy.

“About what? My quitting the club, you struggling to not be a serial killer? We’re not exactly short on topics.”

“Let’s start with Laurel since you’re still in love with her.” He’s not just here for the access to the mainframe, after all. He has a promise to keep.

“So are you,” Tommy almost instantly fires back in a clipped tone.

Oliver looks Tommy straight in the eye. “No, I’m not. And she’s not in love with me. Hood or no. She *begged* me to come talk to you, Tommy, make you see reason. Laurel’s not ready to give up on you yet.”

He can see how the words impact, how Tommy’s eyes widen for just a moment. But then his brows pull down again. “How do I know you’re not ready to give up on her? Don’t think I’ve forgotten she was the first person you wanted to see when you got back.”

“And that was over half a year ago,” he counters. “I think we can both agree things have changed since then. *I’ve* changed. I’m still changing.”

And a conflict is playing across his old friend’s face. He should be going, he can only safely wait a minute more. But he can’t help giving Tommy a chance. The other man finally says, “You can honestly tell me that if Laurel knew about the things you’ve done and accepted that, it wouldn’t change your mind right back.”

“It wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s already someone else who does,” He states plainly “And they’re why I’ve changed.” And he’s hyperaware of the open doorway behind him, how this spacious high-ceilinged room probably allows the sound to travel rather well out into the hallway. So he redirects things back to his friend, saying, “Lord knows I am guilty of a lot of things between us, Tommy. But not you and Laurel.”

Tommy looks taken aback, but Dig’s voice is in his ear, “Guys, you got trouble. Felicity’s about to have some ahead of schedule company.”

“I’m not there yet on the download,” Felicity’s panicked voice comes through next.

Oliver addresses to Tommy, “That’s all I came to say.”

But as he’s turning to go, he hears Barry over the com, “Wait, crap, Oliver, if you’re coming just stall a second.”

And he pauses, perplexed, because what is Barry talking about? But he casts around for something to say to explain his lack of departure. “What exactly do you do here?”

Tommy still seems a little wary, a little uncertain, as he sits in the chair behind his desk. “I work closely with my father.”
Well, he really doubts Tommy’s working that closely with the man, at least on one particular project. Oliver merely nods, then heads out into the hall.

Where Barry is nowhere to be found, nor whatever it was Barry wanted him to wait in Tommy’s office for. Then a ding up ahead causes him to look to the public elevator as the doors are just sliding closed with the scientist inside. And a security guard. And Malcolm Merlyn.

Dig’s voice cuts through before he can act on the impulse of get to that elevator that’s pounding in his ears. “She’s going to get made, Oliver.”

The mission, the mission is priority, and that means get to Felicity. His jaw is clenched as he commands, “Dig, get eyes on Barry. He’s in an elevator with Merlyn, I want eyes on it now.”

Diggle’s “Got it,” does little to reassure his suddenly intense nerves, and it takes everything in him not to go rushing after that elevator. The mission, the mission comes first. Not Barry.

And Barry’s aware of that too, accepts it like he told Tommy just now. Oliver’s just not sure he wants to accept it anymore.

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Barry’s a bit ashamed to admit he’s possibly eavesdropping. It’s terrible, he knows, but well he’s got a certain amount of vested interest in the conversation.

He’s not waiting for the ‘right’ time to talk to Oliver. Just a better one, when they’re not planning and executing elaborate heists. He thinks he’s justified in procrastinating a little. Especially when part of this heist involves Oliver talking about whatever feelings he does or doesn’t have for Laurel Lance, again.

He perks up a bit at the rather definite denial the older man gives to Tommy Merlyn, but then he thinks he’s thrown for as much of a loop as Tommy Merlyn when Oliver mentions a ‘someone else’. He doubts Tommy’s heart drops into some pit somewhere below his stomach like Barry’s does, though.

Someone else. Oh.

He’s initially thankful not to have to dwell on it—or how the way Oliver had been talking and acting had made him think things—at the sound of voices coming down the hall. At least until he turns his head and sees who it is. Malcolm Merlyn with some security guard.

Barry mutters through the com link, “Wait, crap, Oliver, if you’re coming just stall a second.” Merlyn’s walk down the hall seems agonizingly slow, but if he sees or hears that Oliver is in his son’s office, that will most definitely mean Oliver can’t get back to Felicity. The Undertaking’s architect slows even more, however, just as he’s approaching the elevator and eyes Barry questioningly.

So he makes a split-second decision. Needing to hurry the man along, Barry approaches while flashing his badge. “Mr. Merlyn, could I borrow a moment of your time? Barry Allen, CSI with the SCPD.”

In his experience powerful businessmen, when confronted with minor annoyances like himself, tend to quickly make their excuses and depart. So he’s surprised when Merlyn gives a perfectly polite smile and amiably replies. “Not at all. I was just headed out to a meeting, but if you’d ride down to the lobby with me I can spare a few moments for our city’s hard-working force.”
The security man has pressed the button for the elevator and it’s reached their floor, the doors opening. “Oh, uh, thank you,” Barry stammers out because, well, this isn’t in the plan at all. But a few minutes won’t hurt, right?

He’s ushered in with the other two men filing in on either side. “Now what can I do for you?”

Is he ever glad he came prepared. His role in the plan was mostly to be a lookout, and to ensure Tommy stayed in his office after Oliver left—which now they’ll just have to hope the other man doesn’t get curious on his own—but he has his satchel with him to play the part, and retrieves a file he’d made a copy of that holds just as much interest to the older Merlyn, if not more.

“We’ve been having some trouble processing some of the scene of the assassination attempt earlier this year. It’s nothing too problematic, but the D.A. wants to have everything wrapped up before putting the Triad member who was caught on trial.” It’s mostly a lie, but Barry knows he’d rather have it wrapped up for certain. He feels like there’s something they’re missing.

“I see,” Merlyn nods. “May I ask what exactly is causing the problem?”

“There were two other members killed by an unidentified shooter in the north stairwell, and in your and your son’s statements that was the stairwell you took to reach your panic room.”

He’d been acting as if perusing the file, trying to make this seem like a routine, almost casual inquiry, just part of the job. But there’s something unnerving in Merlyn’s tone that forces him to look up as the man replies, “If I didn’t know better, Mr. Allen, I’d think you were suggesting something.”

There’s a beat where they’re both just staring at each other, then Merlyn’s lips quirk up and Barry finds himself having to share a forced laugh at what had apparently been a joke.

“No, no, of course not,” he says after a couple awkward chuckles. “I just, um, was hoping you could review your statement from that night, just to make sure nothing was missed.”

“Yes, of course,” the other man says, takes the file just as there’s a ding and the doors open onto the lobby. All three of them step out, though they stop a few feet away so that Merlyn can read through his written statement. Then he flips the file shut and hands it back. “Everything still seems in order. And I’m afraid most of my memories of that night are more than a little hazy.”

“That’s understandable,” Barry offers. Hates himself for having to say, “Thank you, Mr. Merlyn.”

“All right. I certainly hope the trial still goes well for the D.A.” Then the man checks his watch. “If you’ll excuse me.” He and his security guard turn and leave, and Barry immediately drops his pleasant smile.

He activates his com, “Hey, guys, is Felicity ok?”

Dig’s “She’s good. They’re headed down your way,” is overshadowed however by a voice he’s only vaguely familiar with.

“Oh!” He turns with widened eyes to see Thea Queen of all people marching across the lobby toward him.

“Um, hey.”

“You’re Ollie’s friend, right? The one that works at the police station?”

He blinks. “How did you know that?” He’s pretty sure neither he nor Oliver mentioned his specific occupation at the hospital the other day.
She gives a shrug and something of a kind of enigmatic smirk. “I have my ways. And I might have seen you there a couple days ago.” He remembers being in the bullpen confirming for Lance and Hilton the type of arrows as the Dark Archer’s and hearing a few of the lower-ranked officers talking about a court order delivered by the younger Queen. Some of the boys like Steve had been upset in particular as they’d been about to go off shift.

But now it’s apparently his turn to be at the younger woman’s mercy as she questions, “Why were you just talking to Mr. Merlyn? Is it about the copycat archer?”

“Uh,” he takes a step back under the unexpected interrogation, casts his gaze around. “I can’t really talk to you about that.” There’s a young man just ten or fifteen feet away from them with his back to the lobby looking rather incongruous amongst all the business people in a red hoodie, and he has the distinct impression he might be trying to listen in.

Thea tilts her head to the side and she ups the mischievousness in her smile. “Not even a little bit? Just as a favor to your friend’s little sister.”

“Right, my friend who I’m pretty sure wouldn’t approve,” Barry replies, as he tucks the file safely away in a separate pocket of his satchel.

“I’m very sure I wouldn’t approve,” comes Oliver’s voice directly behind him then, and a hand firm and familiar is laid on his shoulder.

“Ollie!” Thea looks surprised and suddenly nervous at the sight of her older brother. “What, uh, what are you doing here?”

Oliver’s apparently keeping his hand where it is—which he wishes he could just ignore, but it’s just so warm and he can feel it through his jacket and shirt—and he steps up beside Barry and gives a softer, “Hey,” like they’re just seeing each other for the first time today before he says to his sister, “I had a meeting with Tommy. What were you talking to Barry about just now?”

“Oh, uh, we just bumped into each other in the lobby.” Her eyes are pleading for him to corroborate her story, but he’s momentarily distracted by the relieving sight of Felicity slipping out the lobby doors, throwing a look over her shoulder at them.

And really, it’s not like Oliver isn’t smart enough to know it’s a lie. “Is that your friend Roy?” Thea looks about to stammer out another response and the older man simply cuts across her with, “What’s really going on, Thea? The truth, please.”

And does Barry feel uncomfortable right in the middle of this. Thea’s looking just about anywhere but her brother when she answers, “Um, we’re trying to find the vigilante.”

Barry has to disguise a startled laugh as a cough while Oliver gives an almost perplexed, “What?”

“Roy’s kind of been obsessed with him since he saved his life in the subway. And I overheard Detective Lance saying the copycat archer was connected to Merlyn Global, so—hey!”

Oliver’s dropped his hand from Barry only to take his sister’s arm and start walking her over to this friend of hers, who as he turns at the call of his name Barry can now definitely recognize from the Savior’s last broadcast. He follows a few feet after just in time to hear, “Roy. We haven’t met, I’m Thea’s disapproving older brother.”

“I know,” says Roy, which is probably the only thing that can be said in the face of an introduction like that. What follows is probably a very painful handshake for Roy, at least it looks that way from where Barry’s standing, though to his credit he barely grimaces.
Then Oliver drops absolutely any pretense of being polite whatsoever to state. “Don’t mess around with the Hood. He’s a psychopath, he’s dangerous, and anyone who gets near him winds up dead.” Barry winces at each one. “That will not be my sister. Do you hear me?”

“Ok,” says Roy, though while Thea looks almost terrified he is relatively unaffected.

“Take her home, now,” is Oliver’s final command before striding towards the front door. Thea watches with wide eyes while Roy is closer to scowling.

Barry can’t help taking a couple steps closer and offering, “He saved my life, too. The Hood, I mean. He’s really not that—”

“Barry!”

“—bad. Ok, nice to meet you,” he finishes quickly to the young couple who are now looking at him oddly, and jogs over to where Oliver waits just before the door fixing him with a stern look.

“What were you doing?” The older man demands as they finally exit Merlyn Global. He holds the door open for both of them and ushers Barry out with a hand to the small of his back, probably in an effort to get him away from Thea and Roy as soon as possible.

“Why would you want your sister to think you’re a psychopath?” He volleys back.

But Oliver shakes his head. “I meant getting in an elevator with Merlyn. He’s dangerous, Barry. The last thing I want is you putting yourself in his sights.”

“Yeah, I think he’s got bigger things to worry about than the random CSI asking about a months-old case.” He risks giving Oliver a nudge in the side because, well, his hand is still at Barry’s back and it kind of leaves him pretty close with his arm draped over him and it leaves Barry feeling warm and willing to take risks. “Anyway, left you free to get Felicity, right? Mission accomplished.”

Oliver doesn’t seem any happier about it, but his expression softens when he catches Barry’s eye and he swears that hand is pressing even more insistently into his back. “Nearly.” He doesn’t let Barry stray from his side until they’re approaching the others at the car.

And Barry is trying to figure the other man out. During the heist, for a moment here or there Oliver had looked at him or said something in this certain tone that just...he’s no expert in flirting, but it had felt different than their usual joking around. Yet he’d told Tommy there was already someone else in his life to make him move on from Laurel. Which if that’s the case and he pretty much didn’t have a chance from the start—who’s he kidding, before the start—then could Oliver maybe keep his hands to himself?

Barry should probably be upset with himself for not being able to just focus even by the time they get back to the Cave. Felicity’s getting to work on finding the seismic device’s location in the data she pulled from the mainframe while it’s up to Dig to ask Oliver, “You all right?”

Oh, so he isn’t the only one who’s noticed something’s weird about the man today. Not just him.

Oliver does look in pretty deep contemplation. He’s leaning back against a table with one hand laid over the book he’s carried with him for five years. “I’ve been using the list to carry out my father’s mission, but that wasn’t really what he meant. It was the Undertaking. If I stop the Undertaking, I’ll have honored his mission.”

“So what are you saying, Oliver? You’d just be done after that, hang up the hood?” Dig’s suggestion gets Felicity to look up from her computer and Barry to stare at the vigilante with wide eyes.
Oliver crosses his arms, frowns. “I don’t know. I used to tell myself when I’d crossed off every name from the list, I’d be done. People like the Count, though, or Webb, Dodger, Lynns, I stopped them. But I don’t know if I can still do that and—” He pauses, fist curled overtop the book now as his eyes land on him. “Barry, can we talk?”

“Uh, sure?” He’s a little uncertain, mostly because he’d thought they were talking, the whole team. But he gets it when Oliver inclines his head toward the stairs and leaves for them. Barry lingers a moment to look between Felicity and Diggle. The former shrugs her shoulders although there’s just the hint of a smile on her face, while the latter gives him an encouraging nod.

Not really knowing what either of them mean by that but feeling better, Barry follows the older man up into the empty club. Oliver’s standing behind the bar with one hip leaned against it so Barry joins him there, mirrors him. “What did you want to talk about?”

Oliver looks at him, a gaze that seems to sweep up and down. “Wow. I was hoping this was going to be easier to say.”

“What, Oliver Queen speechless? Call the press,” he has to quip, if only to break the tension because Oliver’s using that voice again, all soft and low, and there’s no way they’re getting through a whole conversation like that without him noticing it does things to Barry.

He gets a laugh for that along with, “No comment.” So yeah, maybe they can ease into things.

Except Barry has to blurt, “Are you really going to quit being the Vigilante?”

Oliver doesn’t seem too upset, only saying, “I started being the Hood because of my father’s mission. But the last few months, it’s become more than that. Like you always said.” Barry’s more than a little surprised by that remark, but Oliver just keeps on going. “So much of what I do as the Vigilante is because of you, Barry. Dig and Felicity, too, but…you always told me I could be more than just a killer. That I could mean something to the people of this city.”

“Because you already did,” he has to point out, “You do, I mean, you saw that Roy guy today. And you’re not just a killer,” he tacks on, like an automatic reflex.

For once it makes Oliver actually smile. “So you’ve been telling me. I don’t know how you saw it, Barry, but I think I’m finally ready to believe it. And maybe,” he hesitates, eyes flitting to the side and then fixing back on Barry. “Maybe I’m ready to do more than pretend to be happy. I just don’t know if I can do that, live a life of my own that’s free of my past and still be the Hood.”

Barry considers that one, turns to lean back with his elbows braced on the bar in a pose of nonchalance as he thinks. “I don’t know if we’re ever free of our pasts, Oliver. If you quit being the Hood and all this is just done, I know I’ll just go right back to investigating my mom’s case. Dig will probably keep hunting for Deadshot. But it’s the stuff that hasn’t been about the Undertaking or the list that brought us all together to work towards something for the present, just because it’s the right thing to do, you know?

“But I get it if you want more time after all this to spend with your sister. Or, um—” He scuffs his shoe back and forth, watches it, tries to ignore Oliver watching him. Supplying the word ‘mother’ probably won’t work in this case right now, but he can’t bring himself to say ‘someone else’. That makes it real.

“Barry,” Oliver cuts in, leaning closer just to make sure that he’s in Barry’s line of sight when he eventually looks up. “You know you’re not just a—this isn’t work or even just a team. After the Undertaking, if I stop being the Vigilante, I’m not going to want to stop spending time with you.”
And something in him relaxes, an anxiety that’s been motivating his whole side of the conversation from its start. He wishes he could better control his expressions because he probably has the most relieved, dopey smile on his face because Oliver’s said just about the one thing that can make him feel better. Well, the one thing in the whole realm of possibility that he’d ever actually say, anyway.

“That’s, um, great,” he manages, has to duck his head because, yeah, he really is grinning that much, he’s probably going to split his face open. Barry fiddles with the strap of his satchel to fail miserably at playing it cool, then manages to rescue himself from this moment by remembering something. “I guess we can talk about your possible retirement after then. But I have something that might help finish things with Merlyn faster. He was acting kind of weird when I asked him about the unknown shooter. His prints are all over the file I had him look at now, and I bet if I run it against the partial off the gun it’ll match. We get the police on that, it might slow him up so we can find the seismic device.”

“Good,” Oliver says, though he seems weirdly impatient with Barry’s—well, it is a diversion, isn’t it?—diversion. His one hand rests rather near to Barry’s elbow and he’s still leaned in close enough that Barry thinks he can feel the heat radiating off him. “But none of this is what I wanted to talk to you about.” The older man shifts his footing so that he’s more fully in front of him now, but keeps his hand where it is and for one absurd second Barry realizes if Oliver lifts his other hand to match he’ll have him effectively pinned to the bar top. Barry slides his own arms back a bit, grips the edge of the bar with white knuckles. “It is important to me, to know what you think about me quitting the Hood because that affects you and the others, but there’s more to it than that.”

“There is?” God, why does he sound so breathy? Barry swallows, and Oliver’s gaze dips for a moment, like he’s actually watching his throat work. He feels a little lightheaded at the bizarre turn this conversation’s taken, tries to remember when and why Oliver ended up so close, and how that’s really not that out of the ordinary except this time it’s different, he can feel it. Someone else, he repeats like a mantra in his head, someone else. But it’s hard when Oliver has this soft sort of smile that he’s never actually seen him give anyone else and his breath is just barely ghosting over his face as he replies, “Yeah. Barry, I—”

The front doors of the club open and he has to crane his neck around to spot the first couple staff members entering. No doubt turning more than a little red, Barry ducks to the side, puts some proper distance between himself and Oliver who, when he chances a look at his face, would be putting an arrow through each of his employees based on expression alone. The hand that had been splayed on the bar top is now curled in a fist.

Embarrassment and extreme confusion aside, Barry could probably suggest they just head out around the back because considering what just happened, he’s really starting to think right now might possibly be a ‘right’ time even if those don’t exist. “I’m gonna, uh, head to the precinct. Run that test,” he mutters instead, and practically flees the place, only stopping a good five blocks away when he’s sure he’s alone to try and get his breathing under control. Not to mention his wildly pounding heart.

What. Was. That? Oliver was—and he just—ugh. Barry leans his head back against the wall of the nearest building, does his best not to actually groan aloud.

He doesn’t know if Oliver was trying to come onto him or not. It seemed like it, but then again that could just be Barry’s wishful thinking warping things. In either case, he ran off like an idiot, so he’ll probably never know. Well, maybe not never. But now he’s agonizing over just what Oliver was going to say when he should’ve just said something and that be the end of it. In either direction. Either Oliver would’ve accepted his feelings…or he wouldn’t have. And then, probably, he really
wouldn’t want to see Barry at all after he retires.

That’s far too great a risk for Barry to handle, though, which is why he’s here really. He’d rather agonize alone over a possibility than actually be alone because he acted on a possibility. The very thought terrifies him, like it always has. He might as well just give up now, play the good friend like he did with Iris, counselor and cheerleader to whatever’s going on in Oliver’s life, vigilantism or no. Right now, there’s far more than enough going on without Barry’s personal troubles anyway. They’ve got a city to save.

It’s dark by the time he makes the walk from the Verdant to his lab, but the test is completed pretty quickly since he’s only running it against one sample. A match. Even if Malcolm Merlyn hires the Dark Archer to do most of his dirty work, in one instance he’s gotten his hands dirty. He sends the information along to Felicity as well as shooting an email to the crime lab supervisor marked urgent, then figures he might as well put in a shift now rather than later to further calm himself down, gets to work on his inbox tray.

Barry’s yawning hours later in the early morning light and contemplating heading for coffee before checking back in with the team, but when he turns and pushes his chair out he notices Detective Lance standing in his doorway.

Uneasily, he asks, “Can I help you, detective?” He doesn’t think he’s ever seen the grizzled man look so severe.

That unease only turns to dread when Lance steps inside, pulls the door shut and comes to loom over his desk. Taps his finger on a casefile he’s brought marked Vigilante. “It’s over, kid.”

Apparently he didn’t have enough personal troubles. Barry’s heart, if possible, sinks even lower.

Chapter End Notes

So you all probably hate me now. Aborted confessions and it looks like the jig is up when it comes to Detective Lance! We’ll be moving fully into the finale episode next chapter, lot of big things planned. Would love to hear your thoughts on this one, and thanks for reading!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Posting this right before I leave for work, so not much I can say except thanks for continued support and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quentin hadn’t wanted to believe it at first. He’d been following a hunch that tenuously linked the copycat archer to Merlyn Global. At least it seemed tenuous until Kelton found proof that someone else had been looking into it independently as well, an IT worker at Queen Consolidated named Felicity Smoak.

In Miss Smoak he’d quite possibly found his weak link in the whole chain leading back to not the copycat, but the vigilante himself. Her computer is a treasure trove of evidence, hacking and research all done in cases related to the Hood. When they’d picked her up to take back to the station for questioning, he’d had her check in her things with the desk sergeant. One of those things had been her phone and he’d had a quick look at her most frequent contacts to see if he could determine just who she’s informing to.

But one name near the top had caught his eye: Barry. He’d checked the number against the one in his own phone under Allen. They’d been the same. A couple taps of a finger had shown a message received by the blonde woman very recently stating, Ran the test. It’s a match. Which could’ve meant almost anything except he’d had Kelton pull up the crime lab’s server to see that a fingerprint test had been run off Allen’s computer shortly before that message had been sent. So it’s clear CSI Barry Allen had told Smoak, who is almost certainly in league with the Vigilante, the results of a police crime lab test. Which doesn’t look very good for Allen at all.

In league with the Vigilante. He couldn’t seem to keep Laurel away from him at first, and now this kid…

Quentin hadn’t told Kelton the reason for the look at the crime lab server, hadn’t mentioned the phone correspondence between the woman they’re holding and the forensic specialist. He’d simply told the CSU Tech he was going to let Smoak stew for a few minutes, really let the nerves build up, before he’d headed up the stairs to a small lab near the back of the precinct.

Now that he’s sitting here, the kid’s pale face and wide eyes pretty much confirm the suspicion, but he begins anyway, “Picked up a Felicity Smoak today on information linking her to the Vigilante. You know her?” Allen’s eyes had gone even wider at his words, but he says nothing. “Well, her phone says you do. Says you also sent her results of a fingerprint test you ran up here. Want to tell me why?”

“Malcolm Merlyn was the unidentified shooter,” Allen states, “the night of the assassination. He lied in his official statement—”

“You think I care about that right now, Allen?” He snaps. Honestly it sounds pretty interesting but they’ve got bigger things to talk about right now. “Whether he did or not, you sent that to someone who’s working with the Hood. You know what that makes me think?” Allen averts his gaze but he’s shut his mouth again. Quentin clenches his hand tight around the casefile he brought with him.
“Listen to me, kid. I haven’t talked to your friend downstairs yet, but the evidence is pretty stacked against her. You come clean to me now, and I won’t have to drag you down there with her. How long’s this been going on?” Allen’s turned his head to the side now, still isn’t talking. “Look, if this is about what happened at the asylum, some way of paying him back,” he guesses, leans forward a little, “you don’t owe him anything.”

“Yes I do,” the kid insists, though his voice is wavering.

“Why, because he killed someone before they could finish killing you? You think he cares about you?”

“Yes.” And he does look at Quentin then, strong and scared all at once.

“Then I guess you must be pretty friendly with him, huh? Know who he is?” And the fear overtakes the kid’s expression. “You tell me that, you can walk away from all this. No questions asked.” But Allen only turns his head away again, squeezes his eyes shut. Quentin’s thin patience just about snaps and he’s on his feet. “Damnit, Allen! You know, your foster father asked me to look out for you, protect you. What’s he going to think about this? You really want to throw away your life for this nut? That eager to join the old man in Iron Heights?” The kid draws in a breath much shakier than the last few and scrubs a hand over his face, but keeps his silence. Quentin’s starting to get the idea that this goes a lot further back than the asylum incident, and he has to wonder how he could’ve missed it. How, over and over again, people like this kid, like Smoak, like Harper, like Laurel, seem to be looking to the Hood instead of to the law. Has this city really failed so badly?

There’s the ring of a certain phone in his pocket, and the way Allen’s eyes jump to it he can tell they both know what it means. He takes it out, shakes it at Allen. “Saved by the bell. I’ll be talking to Smoak after this. Last chance.” Allen says nothing and Quentin heaves a sigh, walks to the door as he answers the call.

“Hello, detective,” the altered voice speaks before he can say much of anything.

“Funny you should call. I got two of your trusty sidekicks here.”

“I don’t have sidekicks,” the Vigilante denies, not like that’ll do much good for either Smoak or Allen. “When I need help, I call you.” Then in the next breath, “Malcolm Merlyn plans to level the Glades with a manmade earthquake using technology from Unidac Industries.”

“What?” Quentin replies, can’t help a laugh because of all the things to try and distract him from the case with, the lunatic picks this? “Now you’re just trying to have some fun with me.”

“I don’t know what Merlyn’s timetable is,” the Hood continues undeterred, “so you need to evacuate the Glades immediately. Get as many people to safety as you can. Whatever you think of me, Detective, please believe this.” There’s a click as the line goes dead.

Quentin stands there a long moment, then looks back over his shoulder at Allen. The kid’s staring back at him, but he can’t be sure if he’s heard or not. There’s only one way to really confirm, so he simply raises a finger, orders, “Stay put.” Then he heads back down the stairs to Felicity Smoak.

The IT genius is truly a nervous wreck by this point, though she’s clearly trying to hold it in with her hands clasped tightly together on her lap and her eyes staring fixedly at the wall. She looks up at his entrance, but before she can say anything he tells her, “Just got a call from your hooded friend.”

“I’m not friends with anybody in hoods,” she’s quick to dispute.

“Save it. What can you tell me about Malcolm Merlyn?”
Her eyes widen in recognition and she states, tone suddenly grave, “That he’s a much bigger problem than me, Detective.”

He stands his ground for just a moment longer. He’s got two of the Hood’s biggest partners right here, in this building. Should be like having the vigilante over a barrel. Instead it’s him being forced to cave as he stands aside from the door. “Then get Allen and get out of here. But don’t leave town.”

Though she’d looked shocked at the mention of the kid, she ends up much more reassured and grabs up her purse, only pausing once she’s through the door. “You know, I used to think the Vigilante was a criminal, too, but it seems to me, whoever he is, he’s willing to sacrifice an awful lot to help the people of this city. Kind of makes him a hero, doesn’t it?” Then she’s gone.

He takes in a deep breath and lets it out, then heads off to see Pike. The Lieutenant is understandably shocked at his claims of the upcoming attack on the Glades, and when he’s asked for a source he only discloses the phone. Not Smoak, not Allen.

The Vigilante and his partners aren’t the only ones willing to sacrifice.

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Every time he thinks he’s got a handle on things in his life, it seems something else has to go wrong for Tommy. Oliver is found alive on some island, and his dad cuts him off. He gets a real job and starts getting serious with Laurel, only to find out his best friend is the one who’s been running around with a bow and arrow at night shooting people. He starts to process that, but then has to wonder just how much of his relationship with Laurel is based on Oliver’s current unavailability.

Last evening, after Oliver’s admittedly shocking visit to his office, he finally went back to Laurel. He’d knocked on the apartment door, remembering a time not so long ago he’d had a key, tried to recall just what he had planned to say.

But then she’d opened the door and he’d lost all train of thought. Her eyes—God, they were beautiful—had widened and a smile had come briefly to her face. “Tommy,” she’d said softly, then more guarded, “What are you doing here?”

He hadn’t been able to blame her. He’d hurt her, in a way worse than the many other girls he’d had careless flings with. For once it’d hurt him, too. Shouldn’t that have made him realize? “Oliver might have come and talked to me. I…Laurel, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She’d asked with her arms crossed, making him work for it. She was the only one he’d ever wanted to for.

“It’s not that I didn’t trust you,” he’d started off with. “Or that I thought you didn’t- wouldn’t want to keep being with me. But things with you and Oliver, you guys have always been…complicated,” he’d struggled to explain.

Laurel had considered the words. “That’s pretty accurate. We probably always will be, Tommy. I mean, I was going to live with him.” He’d looked down at his feet, hearing in that all the same doubts and fears that had motivated him to break things off with Laurel in the first place. “But you know who I did end up living with?” She’d waited till he’d lifted his gaze back up, then had given him a warm, gentle smile. “You, Tommy. I think I want to be done with complicated.”

And slowly, for what felt like the first time in days, a smile had grown on his own face. “Me too.” He’d finally stepped over the threshold and met her lips with his own.

So now, things settled between him and Laurel again, it’s time to do one last thing before considering
his life uncomplicated; bury the hatchet with his oldest friend. Of course, that’s where things have to go wrong again.

He catches Oliver on the main floor of the Verdant the next morning. The other man stops at the sight of him, surprised and a bit hesitant, especially when Tommy offers something of a grin. “Well, if it isn’t my best friend in life.”

“Hey, buddy.” He can practically hear the uncertainty rolling off of Oliver in waves.

“Look, I’m not going to say we’re good again,” he decides to help the man out a little, if only because it’s honestly a bit weird to see the Oliver that’s come back from the island at a loss. “But I took your advice, went back to Laurel. We’re fixing things.”

When all Oliver can offer is a nod and a mild, “Good,” he can’t help but notice. It seems like he’s just distracted, but what if…?

So he checks a final time, “And you’re really ok with that?”

Oliver seems to take in the uneasy shift in his stance, because he refocuses and gives a sincere, “Yes, Tommy. I’m happy to hear it.” Wow, he’s really got to meet this ‘someone else’ Oliver mentioned and thank them from the bottom of his heart. But his friend’s expression turns more solemn before he can voice the sentiment as he says, “But Tommy, there’s something going on…I need you to promise me you and Laurel are going to keep out of the Glades. I don’t know for how long.”

Tommy takes a step back. “Why?”

“Our fathers. They’re not the men we thought they were,” the other man tells him, frustratingly cryptic.

“What are you talking about?” He has to demand now.

Oliver seems to think it over for a long moment before finally stating, “They made a plan together to destroy the Glades.”

Well that deserves another full step back. “Wait, what?” It becomes pretty clear it’s not just meant as a sick joke so he continues, “Do you have any idea what you sound like right now?”

And he starts recalling all the times he’s heard the phrase lunatic used to describe the Hood, this man before him as Oliver takes a step forward. “Your father’s going to do it, because he thinks it’ll avenge your mother’s death.”

He flinches. “That’s not— you can’t—don’t talk about my mother,” he finally decides. “My father wouldn’t—”

“Wouldn’t kill? He shot two Triad members, didn’t he, Tommy?” His eyes widen as he draws in a sharp breath. How could Oliver know? “Barry matched his fingerprints to the gun that was used. Maybe it was self-defense,” Oliver affords him before his look turns cutting, “But then how’d he learn to do that and why wouldn’t he want you telling the police?”

He’s breathing harshly now, grits his teeth because of course as soon as he makes up his mind to try and mend things between them, Oliver picks now to go off the rails about something. If it wasn’t going to be about Laurel, it just has to be his family, doesn’t it? “Maybe for the same reasons you wouldn’t want me talking to the police? My father is not some crazed murderer, unlike some people I know, Oliver, and I don’t care what your little CSI pal has to say about any of it!”
There’s a flash of something, anger, in the other man’s eyes, but all he says is, “I think you know better, Tommy. You have always known the man your father was.” Tommy shakes his head, turns and marches right out of there before he does or says something he regrets, wondering why he even bothered. Oliver calls after, “Just please, keep yourself and Laurel out of the Glades.” Like he cares. Like this is more than some crazy conspiracy he thought up while out fighting his self-assigned crusade. He wishes he could try and understand the man Oliver is anymore.

His phone buzzes, a text from Laurel herself. *Hey, everything ok?* He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment before getting in his car. His stuff is still back at his new place and he hadn’t left a note or anything before he’d gone out. She must be worried.

He sends back, *Yeah, just have to see my dad. Work stuff.* He ought to check in at the least. And hell, maybe he’ll even ask his father about this supposed plan Oliver’s told him about. Not to see if it’s true or anything.

It can’t be true.

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Felicity is possibly speeding on her way to the Verdant, Barry just as visibly tense beside her in the passenger seat. They’d had to run all the way from the precinct to her car at Queen Consolidated—not an easy feat in heels, she might add—and only paused once when they’d first gotten to the vehicle for a thank-God-we’re-not-arrested hug. It had seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

“So how did Detective Lance find out about you?” Barry finally asks her when they’ve both caught their breath after driving for about five minutes.

“I think someone in the tech division must have caught me trying to break into the Merlyn Global Mainframe. I was getting a bit sloppy near the end,” she hates to admit, and feels even worse when she has to admit, “He must have gone a little through my phone to figure you out. I don’t even want to know what would’ve happened if he’d traced back everything on Oliver and Diggle.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault. Maybe we should get burner phones or make up codes or something,” he suggests.

“Or we could move to Florida, Ohio, or a majority of New England where they’re not allowed to search your phone on arrest,” she recommends, which earns her a funny look from the man who actually is in law enforcement. “What? I know my tech rights.”

He shakes his head. “So, um, why do you think Oliver brought Detective Lance in on the Undertaking? I thought you were just going to locate the device and Dig was going to disarm it.”

She grimaces. “Merlyn found my Trojan and decided to move the device. Also he’s totally the Dark Archer and he held Oliver captive to brag about it.”

“Wait what?” She’s fairly certain that if Barry were behind the wheel he would’ve slammed on the brakes. “*How* was that not the first thing you said? Is he ok? Is he- oh God—”

“Barry!” She snaps before he can start hyperventilating or something. “It’s ok, Dig found him, they got out, please stop yelling at me while I drive.”

It takes a moment for that to sink in, but then he collapses back against the seat. “Oh. Wow, I picked the worst time to pull an all-nighter at work.”

“Yeah,” she has to agree. “Especially considering…”
She’s trailed off invitingly, and he doesn’t disappoint with a raised eyebrow and decidedly confused, “What?”

“You just sort of ran off. Last thing Dig and I knew, you and Oliver were going to ‘talk’,” if her hands were free she’d be sorely tempted to use air quotes, “and then a few minutes later he came back down without you and said you’d gone to work.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees him fidget. “Yeah. So?”

“So what did you talk about?”

More fidgeting. “I…don’t know. We didn’t actually talk about, um, what we were going to talk about. Or what Oliver wanted to talk about. I think.”

Huh. Well that explained the crushing disappointment that had been on Oliver’s face when he’d returned to the Cave alone last evening and muttered something about the club opening before tersely asking her if she’d located the device yet.

“Well, if no one had ever found out about the plan, he still would’ve needed to put the device somewhere it wouldn’t be seen, so that it looked like an actual earthquake,” Barry reasons aloud.

“You mean?” Dig clarifies, and the scientist nods.

“Underground, you mean?” Dig asks. “There aren’t any overly active fault lines that I’m aware of in Starling, but a U.S. geological survey would be able to tell you more.”

Felicity pulls one up as they’re talking, and her eyes go wide in excitement. “Guys! There is a fault line, not known to be active, but probably if Merlyn’s device triggered it, it would give him the result he wants. And for a mile it runs under the old Tenth Street subway line.” She reaches for Oliver’s book of names discarded on the table and flips to the inside cover with the strange little symbol that had eluded her for months. “Somewhere on that line has got to be where Merlyn’s placed it.”

Oliver returns just shortly after, seeming relieved to see Barry and Felicity back from the precinct, but with the rather terrifying news that Merlyn has adjusted his timetable to make the Undertaking tonight. Yet when they tell him about the fault line, he’s suddenly surprisingly confident he knows the device’s location. Before he can elaborate, he gets a call from Thea and then is asking Felicity to turn on the local news.

Moira Queen has called a shocking press conference, actually admitting to her role in the Undertaking and asking people to get out of the Glades. The officers who are arresting her look as dumbstruck as the reporters rushing to ask her questions. And Felicity has to think, if the woman was going to stop being an accomplice to basically evil, she sure picked the last minute to do it.

Still, she feels badly for Oliver’s sake, though Barry’s, “Oliver, I’m so sorry,” sounds a lot more sincere than she thinks she could manage. Oh right, probably because he’s got a parent in prison, too. She’s so glad she doesn’t say any of that out loud.
“Don’t be,” Oliver replies, still looking at the screen. “She gave those people a chance.” Then he goes for a bow, a different one since Merlyn broke the other. He and Dig start debating where the former soldier is going to be; in the subway disarming the device or fighting Merlyn with the vigilante.

Felicity and Barry are watching the back and forth nervously. They’d both prefer the second option, but Oliver is proving stubborn. She gives the scientist a nudge, who looks at her in bafflement when she inclines her head toward the other man. Pointing is likely going to draw attention, so she just pulls up another browser and types say something in the search bar, erasing it once he’s read it. Barry still looks uncertain, which is quickly becoming more frustrating than adorable. She retypes it in all caps.

But it’s when Diggle asserts that a one-on-one duel is sure to get Oliver killed, and Oliver agrees, that Barry abandons their silent dialogue to rise abruptly from his chair. “Oliver, take Diggle with you. Please.” The two of them stare at each other for a long moment, some of the stubborn edge being lost in the older man’s expression.

Dig finally points out, “You haven’t been alone since you brought the three of us into this, Oliver. And besides, army regulations—a soldier never lets a brother go into battle alone.”

Oliver remarks, “I’m out of bows,” which is about as close to a yes as they’re going to get.

Diggle simply replies, “I’ve got my gun.”

Felicity feels just about as relieved as Barry looks, and she says, “I think the two of us are up to doing the disarming.”

The vigilante’s countenance turns serious like a switch has been flipped. “This whole area is ground zero, I want you both out of here.”

They don’t even need to confer with a look to know their answer to that. “If you’re not leaving, we’re not leaving,” she states determinedly. There’s only so much the noncombatants on this team are going to let themselves be sheltered.

Barry adds, “Not like there’s really anyone else who can deactivate the device.” Oliver gives him another long, searching look, before taking up the vigilante cellphone and walking away. “You’re kidding. Lance? He needed Kelton to give him a step-by-step tour on how to work Windows 8!” But Oliver doesn’t turn back.

Diggle gives the two of them a shrug, though he doesn’t look very sorry as he says, “If the two of you are sticking around, then stay down here. The structure’s reinforced, but if it looks like it might cave in, then get yourselves out onto the street and out of the Glades, alright?” Then he’s leaving, too.

“Unbelievable,” Barry says. Felicity sighs and puts her com in. Barry’s expression is mulish, but he does the same, coming to stand behind her chair and looking over the device schematics with her.

“Felicity, I need you to pick up Lance’s cell on a frequency different from mine and Dig’s,” Oliver’s voice comes through shortly. “You’re going to talk him through disarming it.”

“Got it,” she says, knowing it’ll help to limit distractions on their end, though it’ll be tricky managing everything even from the Cave as a base. “Good luck.” Barry doesn’t give his own message, just switches over to Lance’s frequency with her. “Detective Lance?” She tests.

“So you don’t have any friends in hoods,” the plainclothes officer replies wryly. She doesn’t have
much to say that wouldn’t sound sheepish.

But Barry is speaking before she has to come up with anything. “Detective, he told you where the device was located?”

“Yeah, the abandoned subway station near Puckett Street. I’m on my way now, but I got to say, the two of you better know what you’re talking about cause that’s the only way I’m going to know what I’m doing.”

“You don’t need to worry,” Barry decides, and reaches for his jacket, “we’re changing the plan.”

“Barry, what’re you doing?” Felicity asks, whirling her chair around to face him.

At the same time, Lance’s voice comes through with a wary, “Allen?”

“Detective Lance, it’s got to be total chaos out there right now. They need all the officers they can get. And I’ve got a better understanding of the tech anyway, so with Felicity’s help I should be good. There’s no reason I’m going to sit here and do nothing.”

Yes there’s a reason, Felicity thinks despairingly, and if Barry and Oliver had just actually talked the scientist would know the reason. But that’s far too much personal information to share out loud while they’ve got Lance on the line, so she just tries pleading with her friend with her eyes.

He’s still heading for the door as he continues to say, “You’ve got a daughter who works in the Glades, Detective. If you’re going to help, then evacuate people. For the city, and for your family.”

“Hey, kid, you got family, too,” the detective appears to be on her side of the issue here.

Barry pauses at the top of the stairs. “Well,” he finally says, “I think they’d all be happier if I did the heroic thing before following tradition.”

“Damnit, Allen, you’re not going to jail, alright?”

“Barry,” Felicity tries one more time.

He looks at her, but says down the line, “You both know this makes more sense.”

And it does, despite how it goes against what Oliver would rather happen. She hates being forced to recognize it, though, just drops her gaze and turns in defeat to the monitor. “I’m still talking you through. You do not touch anything without my say-so.”

“And I’m getting a call as soon as this thing is shut off,” Lance demands.

“Deal,” Barry says to both of them. She hears the door shut behind her and Lance hanging up in order to join the evacuation effort and look for his daughter. Felicity can only hope Oliver doesn’t try to check in at any point in the near future.

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He feels badly leaving Felicity on her own. But the blonde woman at least can distract herself with instructing whomever on disarming the device. For Barry it had been a choice of sit there and wait, letting his mind conjure up all the terrible, brutal ways Oliver and Diggle could be killed at the hands of Merlyn, or do something. Oliver has to understand sometime, he needs to help. If it wasn’t this, then he’d be out in the street.

But Lance has far more of the authority to take charge in an evacuation, and really this is the safer
option considering he’s dodging rioters and small fires on the way to Puckett Street. Sure, he’ll be next to a bomb which isn’t ideal, but he’s confident in Felicity’s abilities. This will really just be getting everything done as quickly and efficiently as possible. So he and Oliver can in fact talk. Because wow, if he’d known basically Armageddon would be happening in twenty-four hours he would have stayed, would have said something whatever the outcome. It’d have to be better than this not-knowing.

Once he’s broken through the boarded up entrance it’s just a matter of following the tunnel for several yards, his phone acting as a flashlight, before he comes across the device, just as large and glowy as it had been in the schematics, which he’d honestly thought had been for effect. “Felicity, the timer says we’ve got about seven minutes.”

“That’s ok,” her voice comes through, “this is going to be a paperweight in three.” He can’t help a small grin. Yeah, they’re going to be fine. “See the thing that looks like a circuit board?”

“Yeah.” He thinks he can also glimpse a number of wires contained behind it. “Remove it?”

“Yep. When you do, you need to pick out three wires. Green, yellow, and blue. Cut the blue first.”

“Ok.” He does—and instantly realizes that was the wrong thing to do as the device starts to slowly lower itself toward the floor of the subway tunnel. “Oh no. No, Felicity? The timer’s running down faster!”

“Crap, there must be an anti-tamper safeguard. Give me a second!”

“I don’t think we have a second!” He’s watching the numbers tick down at a pace too rapid for him to comprehend, can’t seem to tear his eyes or feet away even as an awful panic has seized him and started clouding every other thought.

“I’m figuring out a way to override it, Barry, just hold on,” Felicity is telling him, but he shakes his head.

“No, no get yourself out, Felicity please. You gotta get out, you gotta tell him- tell Oliver I—I’m sorry,” he chokes out, slaps a hand over his mouth to muffle a sob. But his eyes are already welling up and his legs tremble before he falls back, sitting in front of the device that’s going to be his and countless others’ end, all the faster because of his meddling. Barry draws his knees up to his chest, wraps his arms around because there’s no hiding from anyone he’s crying. If anyone’s listening when he gets no reply from Felicity and can’t call his family or anyone he cares about—all alone in the dark.

“Oliver, I’m sorry.” And the man will just have to take this apology, even if he won’t accept it. Even if he’s not actually there to hear it. Of course Barry can’t even do this right, like he can’t disarm an earthquake device and save people, can’t find his mom’s real killer and get his dad out of prison, can’t just tell Oliver he—

“Love you,” he breathes into the musty subway air, so hushed there’s not even a chance of an echo. And he’s amazed at the relief of it all, but overtaken with the bitterness of knowing he’s been far, far too late again. Barry’s head drops to rest on his knees and all he can do is repeat like a final declaration in this low, lonely place, “I love you, Oliver, and I’m sorry, and I love you—”

“Barry, I cannot believe I have to say this sentence—but I am not Oliver Queen!” Felicity shouts into the com, loud enough he thinks he might need his eardrum checked. But it snaps him back into the moment.
“Oh wow.” It would be extreme embarrassment he feels right before death, wouldn’t it?

“Good, you’re listening. I mean, definitely tell him after—definitely—but I need you to do exactly what I tell you right now. I found the override.”

He has little time to do anything except process her instructions and move to complete them as fast as possible. Sequences are typed in, wires are cut, and at last the ever-present whirr of the device dies, the lights dim.

“Felicity? Felicity, I think we did it!” There’s a near joyous smile taking over his features as he staggers to his feet away from the device. “I’m coming back. Have you heard from— from the others?”

“Switching over to their frequency now,” she sounds just as satisfied, even exhilarated as he does, and despite a brief bout of nerves he switches over as well just in time to hear her tell the rest of their team, “We did it. It’s over.”

When Oliver’s voice comes back after a brief pause, Barry’s heart skips a beat. But not in any way that’s pleasant. “Felicity, there’s another device.”

He’s made it to the entrance he broke through, but Barry freezes in his tracks. “Where?” He hadn’t seen anything, meaning it was further along the Tenth Street line. That’s a whole mile to search, and his mental clock is saying it’s nearly been those seven minutes the first device was counting down to, and—

Barry dives out onto the open street just as a violent tremor rocks the ground, the air rent with screams, screeching wheels and honking horns of vehicles, wailing sirens, and then, further off to the east, what can only be described as a rumbling.

“No. Oh no.” He’s not sure there’s even sound to the words, just that they fall from his lips as he watches smoke rise in the distance, people running wildly back and forth in the street, windows shatter and whole buildings tremble. Dimly he registers one side of a conversation between Felicity and Lance, he thinks, she’s telling him about the second device, that Barry’s still ok.

Then it’s not Lance or Felicity he hears, just Oliver, voice roughened but sharp, “Barry, you need to get back to Felicity. Now.” It must be readily apparent via the open channel of his com just where he is.

“There’s so many people;” he says in something of a daze. “I have to do something.”

It’s a long pause before finally he hears not a protest or a reprimand. Just, “Don’t go past Wells street, alright? Promise me.”

And he can feel the words rising back up in his throat, I love you, but this isn’t an after he wants to share with it. “Promise.” Barry struggles to his feet even as the earth beneath him is still shaking, starts running.

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Laurel stands on the street and watches so much of what she’s spent the last five years working and living for collapse at her feet. CNRI is rubble and flame, and there’s a thought playing over and over in her head of that could’ve been me. If not for her father, who’s got a hold on her arms, keeping her grounded.

She’d been in the office when the shocking press conference had been aired live. It had been almost
impossible to believe, at first. Laurel had only talked to Mrs. Queen what felt like a few days ago, stayed in her home, like nothing had been or was about to go horribly wrong.

Then the first panicked crowds had gathered outside, and she and her coworkers had been able to hear them shouting and questioning. The police sirens had started up soon after and there had been a sense that yes, this was real and happening.

The office went into a flurry of chaos as people saved up and exported work, called loved ones, outright fled, and only a few like Joanna had stayed behind with her to try and gather up the mountains of paperwork not backed up on digital. So many forms, evidence, the difference between winning or losing cases for countless. She’d risked worse before, she’d thought.

But not half an hour ago, her father had come storming into the building. “Laurel!”

“Dad!” She’d exclaimed. “I- how did you—”

But he hadn’t been angry at all to find her there, just relieved. “You’re just like just like me, kiddo, of course you’d still be working. But you’re coming out of this with me, right now Laurel. Right now.”

“Oh my God, is it happening now?” She’d gasped. Joanna and the others had stopped what they were doing, started moving to the exit. Laurel had turned to grab up at least one more stack—she’d known those were the only copies they had—but her father had gripped her shoulders and forced her to look at him.

“I don’t know exactly when. What I do know is somebody is giving me the chance to make sure the only family I have left is safe. I know I haven’t been the best example, honey, or even the best father. After your sister died, I pushed people away, threw myself into my work, I became like a ghost. I didn’t think I had the right to live when my baby girl didn’t. But I’m not letting you make my mistakes, ok? Now come with me, Laurel, please.” His eyes had nearly been brimming with tears and he hadn’t been the only one.

Together they’d hurried down the steps of her workplace and barely made it out before the first tremors. Joanna had cried out in relief at seeing them, ran forward to embrace her, which she’d returned.

She’d turned back around as soon as she let go, finding her voice small and scared amongst all the wreck and ruin already left in the streets, the abandoned cars, the fires here and there, and the groaning, cracking structures all around them. “Daddy, what’s happening? You said somebody—”

He’d already been placing a phone—the vigilante’s—up to his ear, demanding both in anger and fear, “What the hell’s happening? Is he—?” He’d listened a moment, and just a hint of the tension in him had relaxed. Then the ground had rumbled again. “But two of them. Damn.” She hadn’t understood. If the Vigilante had been involved, how could this have still happened? Her father had hung up, and said, “We got to move west, honey. Joanna, you stick with us too. Laurel?”

For her gaze had slipped past him to watch as the roof of her office building finally caved in. “CNRI. My job, my…oh God, dad.”

And he’d seemed to understand she needed a moment to let this fact sink in, the destruction of it all, the crutch she’d used all this time just as much as he’d used his own work or the alcohol in the past.

So they’re standing here instead of moving west like he’s ordered when there’s a shout of, “Laurel!” down what’s left of the road.

“Tommy!” She feels stunned as he runs to her, isn’t sure what to feel—her boyfriend; he’d only just
come back to her; his dad’s plan; he’s out here in all this looking for her—until he pulls her into a tight hug.

“Oh thank God. Thank God you’re ok,” he’s murmuring into her hair, holding her tighter than he probably ought to. But she’s clutching back just as tight.

Laurel’s taking ragged breaths as she pulls back a bit, spots a dark bruise on his forehead. She reaches out to brush fingers over it, making him wince. “What happened to you?”

“I tried to stop my dad and he—he did this.” Tommy’s still got his arms around her, but his eyes are wide and full of horror as he looks all around this living nightmare. “My dad did this. I—I didn’t want to believe it…but he was right.”

“Who was right?” She has to ask, and his eyes find her again.

“I should’ve listened. I should’ve—oh Laurel, I almost lost you for good.” Tommy draws her in again, and she recognizes he needs her, the strength and solidity of her, in this moment. She feels much the same of him.

Everything’s changed and once more their worlds have crumbled all around them. But as always, it’s left them with each other.

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Only after she’d seen to Diggle’s shoulder had Oliver let Felicity treat the wound he’d had to give himself to finally deal the killing blow to Merlyn. It had been nothing more than that. Not a victory, or a means to the greater end of stopping the madness of the Undertaking. Just a kill.

Just a killer after all.

He’s sitting in the dimmed foundry alone now, waiting. He’d insisted Diggle drive Felicity home, go check on Carly and A.J. In part it had been for those selfless reasons; Felicity hadn’t even been able to keep her tears in check and wouldn’t be up to making the trip herself, and it was important for John to see to his remaining family.

But he also needs the solitude to put his thoughts—left in a shambles with the entire east side of the Glades—in order. After five long years, he’s finally tried to fulfill his father’s mission. But though he defeated Malcolm Merlyn, where it counted he’s lost. He doesn’t want to even guess how many people of this city he’s failed tonight. In truth, by letting this happen, he’s failed all of them.

Barry, who he’s waiting for, is still out there now in the middle of it all. He thinks it ought to terrify him, but having watched from a faraway rooftop with Dig the destruction, this too seems distant, futile. He can’t bring himself to put the Hood back on, not when those who he wore it in honor of would be feeling nothing but shame for him right now. And the Oliver Queen he’s been presenting to the world would never be out in the Glades offering aid. Neither part of him saves people. He’s either a dimwitted billionaire or a crazed murderer.

All this time, he’s said Barry isn’t ready to be out in the field playing hero. Maybe it’s really been him who isn’t ready to be a hero.

At long last, the door to the foundry opens and Barry appears. He’s short of breath, hair a mess, clothes smeared with dirt, soot, and torn or fraying in some places, there’s a weary set to the line of his shoulders—and Oliver thinks the younger man is possibly at his most beautiful. This is what he’ll think of when he remembers Barry: the man so determined to do the right thing, for anyone and everyone out of pure goodness.
When Barry even manages a wan smile at just the sight of him, it makes something in his chest hurt that has absolutely nothing to do with his injury. Merlyn had threatened his mother and Thea, but he’d never quite gotten at the depths of his heart.

“Hey.” The other man takes in his solemn features, the way he’s sitting with hunched shoulders on the medical table, and of course has to check, “You’re ok, right? I mean, Merlyn wasn’t—”

“I’m fine,” he tells him, can at least spare him that worry.

“Where are the others?”

“I sent them home,” he states simply. “Will you be fine getting to your apartment on your own?”

Barry’s almost made his way fully over, but pauses. “Yeah. You’re sure you’re ok? Normally you won’t let me cross the street by myself. Now I’ve disarmed a bomb, run around helping people out of crashed cars and small house fires, and you want me to do more stuff by myself?”

Oliver can’t blame him for his confusion. He’s been more than overzealous in his attempts to shield the scientist—more or less successfully—from the dangers of association with the Hood. To think only yesterday he’d been struggling with the question of whether he could have both, the man and the mission. He knows the answer now: he can have neither.

“Barry, tonight you, Felicity, and Diggle proved yourselves. You did everything you could to save the city.” His head bows. “I failed it.”

“Oliver—”

“I just wanted to thank you,” he concludes before the other can really interrupt. With that he slips off the table, shrugs gingerly into his leather jacket. The bike will get him away from this disaster zone most quickly and efficiently.

But Barry takes another step closer, making it clear he’ll have to get around the other man if he truly intends to leave. “Well don’t. Not when almost nobody thanks you for the things you do. And not when I left, before. You were going to say something yesterday, but I left and didn’t let you finish.” He gives Oliver a searching look, but he won’t be taking the invitation. Not even when Barry draws in a breath, turns a little red, and adds, “So call me rude or crazy, but I kind of…thought you should be allowed to say it.”

It’s amazing how something like that can still make him want to smile. But Oliver only closes his eyes for a long moment and says, “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because it wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Barry blinks, rocks back on his heels for a second, his lips forming something of a pout. This would be so much easier if the younger man didn’t have to have adorable written all over him. But it also reinforces that this has to be done. He let it get too far if he’s entertaining those sorts of thoughts. “That doesn’t—I mean this isn’t just about me. What’s fair to you? To us?”

Us. Such a simple word. He wants to hear it more often, wishes he could have that luxury. Instead he reaches for the single duffle he’s taking with him, easily more than he’ll need for where he’s going. No luxuries.

“Not that we’re an ‘us,’” Barry says to his lack of reply, “or that we have been, I mean, cause Oliver,
I—you’re starting to worry me a little, here.” The scientist is taking in the fact that it’s only the backup generator that’s been left on in the place, the Hood suit discarded on a table rather than more carefully stored away, the packed bag he’s slung over his shoulders, and is able to add things up.

“That’s not my intention,” Oliver says, taking a step to bring himself right up to the man, places a hand onto his shoulder—one last time—but he keeps his gaze fixed there. “I only wanted to make sure you got back alright and thank you. For everything you’ve given me these past few months. I didn’t deserve it, didn’t really want it at first. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry I couldn’t stop this.”

“We couldn’t stop this,” Barry corrects, not leaving it up to him to question. And he makes the mistake then, of looking into those eyes, so open, warm, trusting. So much feeling in them that he knows must be reflected in his own.

Oliver’s just as powerless to stop himself from lifting his hand the short distance from Barry’s shoulder to cheek, bringing his other hand up to match. It’s only a matter of gently tilting the younger man’s head to the side, they’re on an otherwise even level. Something sparks in the scientist’s eyes, just before they flutter closed. Oliver’s slip shut despite his best efforts to watch and capture everything.

He can still feel in exquisite detail the softness of Barry’s lips, pliant but insistent against own. A little dry. He sucks the bottom one in between his teeth, wets it with his tongue, and there’s a hot gasp of breath as Barry’s mouth falls open to him. Begging to be explored.

Oliver just barely reigns himself in, a couple nibbles and another slow sweep of his tongue catching just a taste of the other man he wants to get lost in. Yet he pulls off slowly, blinking eyes open to see its left those lips even fuller and reddened, that appealing rosy hue has risen to the other’s cheeks, warm under his hands. He strokes his thumbs over the smooth skin, the curve of his cheekbones, and drops a final, chaste peck on Barry’s irresistibly puckered lips. Rests his forehead against the other’s to give himself just a moment longer.

“This is officially the worst and best retirement party I’ve ever been to,” Barry murmurs, eyes still shut, and Oliver thinks he senses the need to prolong this as well.

It lets him smile, so much fondness for the scientist and the things he says, even as he replies, “It’s not just retirement.” Then he steps back, lowers him arms. Barry lets the hold he’d taken of Oliver’s jacket slacken as he opens his eyes. “It’s goodbye.”

He steps around him and makes his way to the steps, and it’s only when he’s reached the top one that he hears the inevitable call of, “Oliver?” As always, there’s near nothing that can keep him from responding, so he stops, turns. Barry stands alone in the darkened foundry, though what little light there is shows his eyes have an extra sheen to them as he offers a wavering smile and, “Still worst and best.”

“You’ll do better,” is his quiet assurance. Then he’s walking to his bike, getting on and driving far and away from the wreckage of it all.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhh, the kiss! The angst! So sorry! But clearly there have been changes made! We'll see how those unfold! Let me know your thoughts!
Chapter 21

So, we’ve wrapped up season one, and I have to thank you all once again for the amazing response this story has gotten so far, I just cannot believe the support and the interest and love that's been shown and given to me for this. Seriously, you guys are amazing. Now, to set the stage for the next season. Enjoy!

Eobard Thawne has not run ever since that night he lost his connection to the Speed Force. Dr. Harrison Wells is no runner, and certainly not inside his own lab. But if the brilliant scientists of S.T.A.R. labs—some of the best minds the twenty-first century has to offer, he’s made sure—would be bothered enough to tear their eyes from the tragic images being broadcast live from Starling City, they would witness their highly esteemed employer making very quick strides indeed out of the cortex and down one of the winding corridors before stopping at a blank stretch of wall. When his hand is placed to it, it activates to become a door he wastes no time going through, just managing to wait until it’s resealed behind him before commanding sharply, “Gideon, show me the future!”

“Certainly, Dr. Wells,” the AI’s cool tone replies before the front page of *The Central City Citizen* is displayed. He relaxes at the sight of an otherwise foreboding message: *FLASH MISSING, VANISHES IN CRISIS.*

The timeline, mercifully, is intact. And Eobard allows himself a chuckle, can acknowledge the irony of him feeling relief to know that Barry Allen is still alive.

“You just had to make this difficult for me, Barry,” he remarks to the empty room. “This Starling complication is going to be the death of me.”

He hadn’t seen it coming. His ill-fated attempt to kill the Flash had had many unforeseen consequences for Eobard, rippling out through the years even now. He’s learned to be more careful with the changes he makes. But he cannot undo the alterations made to a young Barry’s timeline, and though he’d gotten some pleasure from causing his enemy one of the deepest kinds of pain, he’d nearly wished he could go and change it back almost two years ago, when the young man had picked up and moved.

He’d never imagined it. Barry Allen, the Flash, not live in Central City? It seemed absurd. But then, sometimes the site of a personal tragedy can hold too many memories. That had been the excuse he’d given to the friends and colleagues of Harrison Wells when he’d made his own move to Central—as always, the other man’s reverse.

But the timeline had remained unaltered then, as it does now. He only needs to complete his work on the much earlier particle accelerator, remain patient for a few months more. Barry will come running right back to him, or rather Central. There’s still plenty to draw him home.

His eyes have naturally slid to the left and a little down on the page with the thought—and suddenly Eobard is tense again.

“Gideon,” he says, voice soft, dangerous, “when did the byline change?”
“I do not understand the question, doctor.”

“Iris West-Allen, the Flash’s wife. Her article is written under her maiden name, the hyphenated second half is…missing,” he settles on the word. “Show any references to ‘Iris West-Allen’.”

“Zero references to ‘Iris West-Allen’.”

“Show any references to ‘spouse of Barry Allen’,” he tries.

“Zero references to ‘spouse of Barry Allen’.”

“Look again,” he now demands. It doesn’t make any sense. For a speedster to travel in the Speed Force successfully like Barry will—up until that fateful fight in 2024—they need a thought, a person usually, keeping them grounded in reality. A lightning rod, so to speak. For Barry, he’d easily figured that lightning rod would be Iris West, his childhood best friend and eventual wife.

In observing Barry growing up he’d clearly been smitten with the girl and she’d been at the least fond of him in return. But perhaps in causing the two to end up prematurely living together, he’s altered that relationship too much. Which creates the necessity for a different lightning rod.

As Gideon tells him, however, “I’ve searched 3,452 times, Dr. Wells. There’s nothing.” He can only guess as to the identity of this person. It will be invaluable information to have.

But Eobard’s confident. The Flash has always been an open book. In spite of a childhood now that might have left others hardened or inexpressive, he seems instead to wear his heart on his sleeve, and is even more vulnerable at this younger age.

Barry will give himself away easily. Eobard won’t have to worry or wait for long. In the meanwhile, he thinks it might be time to step up press for the particle accelerator launch. It’ll make Central seem all the more enticing now that Starling’s been rocked to its core.

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He fixes his tie in the mirror for the umpteenth time. His clothes are a somber black, his hair is perfect, and the bruise on his forehead is proudly on display, his badge of honor and honesty. A suggestion by his lawyer.

Who now walks up behind him in the mirror and wraps her arms around him from behind. “Ready?” Laurel asks him.

“If I’m ever ready to apologize on behalf of my father’s company for said father’s act of mass murder, that’s when you’ll know I’ve lost it,” Tommy jokes weakly. Wow, just saying that is…he thinks he’s still in shock.

“It’ll just be the press, Tommy,” she reminds him, holding him there, holding him together really. He knows his hands have been shaking for the past few minutes. “And we have your statement, which you’ve practiced, though not as often as I’d like—”

“I couldn’t- this can’t feel like some school report, Laurel,” he tells her. “I feel so…awful about this, and I have to let them see that. I want them to see it, the whole world to see it. I don’t want them all to think I’m just like him.”

He feels her arms tighten for a moment, and he meets her eyes in the mirror. She’s so strong, loving, accepting of him in the face of all this. When did he ever deserve it? “They won’t. Because you are absolutely not your father, Thomas Merlyn.” Her lips curve into a slight frown as she adds, “I really
wish I’d gotten in touch with Oliver before he left, though. We don’t need him, but his being here would lend even more support to this just being between your parents."

Oliver. No one’s heard from him in days, except Thea who claims her brother is on a trip to Europe, needing the space to process everything about Moira Queen’s own involvement in the Undertaking. Tommy knows that can’t be true, and not just because the other man hasn’t returned any calls or emails. Oliver had probably known about his mother’s role in this plot long before Thea or anyone else.

What he’s more likely processing is the same thing that’s been keeping Tommy awake at nights; not that their parents planned this, but that their plan worked, to a degree. Five-hundred and two people. Dead at their hands.

And Oliver isn’t here to support him now, but where was Tommy when Oliver clearly needed support, help, to try and stop that from happening? Even if it was an impossible task. The other man tried to warm him, and he threw it back in his face. Now look where they are.

“I guess it was too much to hope for six out of six court dates,” he says finally.

A door opens and Laurel steps back just in time for her father to stick his head in. “They’re waiting for you, Merlyn.” He doesn’t say the last name with the venom most people give it now. At least, not without any more venom than he did before all this.

“Thank you, Detect—so sorry, Officer Lance,” he shakes his head, nearly fumbles the cards containing his statement. Takes a final deep breath and shares a look with Laurel before following the newly demoted cop out into the main lobby where this conference has been set up. Laurel walks with him until there’s only a few feet to the podium. Then he’s on his own.

Tommy can’t even count how many different cameras and microphones are pointed at his face. It’s never bothered him before, yet now he finds his throat dry and his hands needing to grip the cards to keep steady.

“Good morning,” he tries, swallows, and restarts, “My name is Thomas Merlyn, the son of Malcolm Merlyn. On behalf of my family, and my family’s company, I come before you today to offer my sincerest condolences for the events of May 15th, 2013, which claimed the lives of five-hundred and two people.” He has to close his eyes for a moment, take another breath, before looking back up.

“Words cannot describe my shock at my father’s actions, nor my grief at the results. I know that no apology can make up for the tragedy that has occurred, could I even give one.” It’s a lie, if they only knew that he’d been told and dismissed it, an apology would be the first of many demands. Still, his voice grows stronger as he once more makes direct eye contact with the cameras. “But I pledge to use every resource I have available, including what was left to me by my father and the Merlyn Global Group, to begin to atone for the harm my family has caused to this city. Thank you,” he says at last, and can finally step back and away, for once glad to be able to leave the limelight.

“Mr. Merlyn! Any comment on—”

“Can you tell us specifically what your plans are?”

“Why did your father carry out this atrocity?”

“Is there any truth to the rumor that your father was killed by the Hood?”

He’s flanked on either side by a Lance as they usher him back into the little side room. “You did great, Tommy,” Laurel tells him soothingly.
“Yeah, well, I had this really great lawyer give me a bunch of tips on what to do and say,” he replies, making her smile. Tommy releases a shaky breath then and, father present or not, has to pull her into his arms, resting his cheek on top of her head. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do next.”

“Perhaps I can help with that,” a feminine voice devoid of almost any warmth states, and they all give something of a start. The woman had been sitting unnoticed in a chair at the far side of the room, but now rises, her heels clacking along the floor tile. She’s probably about Laurel’s height, with long brown hair and very pretty except for the complete absence of a smile.

“This is a private room, I’m going to need to see some ID,” Officer Lance steps forward.

“Certainly,” the woman says, reaching into her purse for an employee badge. “Isabel Rochev, Vice President of Acquisitions at Stellmoor International. Mr. Merlyn, I would like to arrange a meeting with you to discuss the future, or lack thereof, of your family’s company.”

“Excuse me?” It’s Laurel who asks, sounding more than a little indignant on his behalf.

“Right now, Merlyn Global Group is synonymous with mass murder. No amount of good intentions on Mr. Merlyn’s behalf will make up for the fact that investors will be jumping ship like rats,” Isabel Rochev explains bluntly. “Considering Mr. Merlyn’s previous work experience consists of merely the last few months, he is not capable of handling the company’s affairs in such a dire situation.”

“And you are,” he guesses, with more than a little sardonic humor.

She affords him a tight little approximation of a smile at last. “That’s right. I realize now is hardly the time to discuss much more in detail, so if you would take my card and contact me at a later date, I think that will be the easiest for both of us.” She holds one out, which he doesn’t take. “We both know this is your best option.”

He’s barely had a moment to consider his options. “I’ll think about it,” he replies finally, and takes it.

“Very well,” is Isabel Rochev’s answer. “I look forward to hearing from you soon, Mr. Merlyn.” Then she’s striding out the door, head held high.

“Well, she’s pretty confident, you got to give her that,” Officer Lance says after a long moment of silence.

“Tommy, maybe we should wait before thinking about any major company decisions like this,” Laurel says, looking between him and the door with concern. “Just a couple days, give it some time.” He nods. “Ok. Let’s head home,” she decides.

But really, on the drive over and even once back at the apartment, what other options does he have?

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He waits about two blocks from the precinct, head downcast and hands shoved in his jean pockets. Since Lance got knocked down to officer, Roy hasn’t really seen him swaggering around anywhere, but he really doesn’t want to give that guy any excuse to book him for loitering or something stupid. It’s not who he’s trying to catch, anyway.

That’s the guy who’s hurtling down the sidewalk in his direction, lugging a giant bag and darting to the curb every time a taxi passes, only to be rebuffed over and over. He looks exhausted, though Roy figures that’s got to be the same for anybody working law enforcement in Starling City these days.

“Hey,” he calls out when the other man, only a couple years older at most, is just about past him.
When he stops and turns, curiosity and then recognition in his eyes, Roy pushes off the wall, walks up to him.

“Hey, uh, it was Roy, right?” The other man checks.

He nods, then has to admit, “Thea said your name’s Barry.”

“Yeah, Barry Allen,” comes the agreement. “Look, there’s a crime scene I got to head to, so—”

“That’s cool,” he does his best to be amendable, “but if you’re walking anyway, I just wanted to ask you something.”

The guy’s already walking again, so he falls into step even as he’s bracing his pride for the inevitable brush-off. Allen shoots him a bemused look, but says, “Alright, shoot.”

Surprised, he blurts, “What do you think happened to the Hood?” The other man’s step falters a moment, any hint of a smile drops off his face. “I mean, crime’s worse than ever, it’s hell in the Glades, and he’s just disappeared.”

Allen keeps his gaze on his shoes as they continue to walk. “Well…that’s just it, isn’t it?” The other man says after a while. “He’s gone, we don’t know where, Roy. Just that he is. Anyway, I couldn’t really tell you any more than what’s officially on record, right?” He glances at Roy with just the briefest of grins. “And most of the force feels like it’s one less problem to deal with.”

“But you don’t,” he persists. “You said you didn’t think he was bad, even after all that stuff Thea’s brother said. You didn’t take his crap.”

For some reason, it causes the other man some sort of wry amusement. He smirks and gives a wistful shake of his head, like he only wishes what Roy’s just said is true. “Yeah, if I didn’t take Oliver Queen’s crap, my life would probably be way better off right now.” He seems to realize Roy is staring at him blankly—he’s really not here for the details on Thea’s screw-up wimp of an older brother—for he simply gives a sigh and shrug as if to dismiss the matter entirely.

“Ok, but you really can’t tell me anything else about the Hood?” He tries once more.

Allen frowns, then stops, making Roy have to do so as well. “Look Roy, I totally get why you want to find this guy or know more about him, ok? I thought—I still think, he was good for this city, that he helped people. And it’s great that makes you want to stand up and make a difference, too. But just, try not to forget about your own life. Cause if the mission’s all you ever do or think about and then that doesn’t go so well…” He trails, seeming to struggle with what to say or perhaps that he’s said too much. Roy is listening with near rapt attention now, because this is a way better theory than the Hood being killed during the Undertaking that everybody else seems to have adopted.

But the other man only adds, “There’s probably people who care a lot about you. Like Thea. And they’d hate to see you lost or discouraged like that, just throwing yourself into the work until you can’t take it. It hurts them, too.” And he can see, there’s pain there in the other man’s eyes, pain that he’s feeling. Like he’s been that person who cares for somebody else. In the next instant, he’s giving another affected shrug, tapping the bulging side bag. “Not that I take my own advice. Speaking of, I’m really running behind now, so I got to get going.”

“Right,” says Roy, “thanks.”

“Any time,” Allen flashes a last smile and then is back to running down the street, this time away from Roy.
Roy who’s got work of his own soon at Thea’s nightclub. Thea’s just about the only person who cares anything about him, even as much as she disapproves of his activities fighting against the rise of crime in the Glades. Because she worries, he knows. It hurts her.

He heaves a sigh, resolves to come in on time today. And for once, he can honestly tell her he hasn’t bruised his knuckles on somebody’s jaw.

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She doesn’t breathe easy till she’s physically on the train. At long last, after studying and finals and FEMA seizing the transportation system and then only prioritizing the family of victims, Iris is finally going to see her best friend. Her idiot of a best friend who won’t even take off a single weekend to come see him himself, get away from the disaster zone that is Starling for a while.

The day the news had started reporting about the Undertaking, people in Central had been unsure what to think at first, were even skeptical. She remembers texting Barry about the brief clip they’d gotten of a press conference given by Moira Queen of all people, *Is she for real?*

Hours later, things in Starling had been getting worse with looting and rioting taking over a whole section of the city, it was all even the local news had been playing, and Barry still hadn’t replied. She’d tried calling and it had gone straight to voicemail. His phone had been off.

Iris and her dad had each tried calling a number of times as the night had gotten progressively worse. She’d begged him to put in a call to the detective friend he’d made in Starling, but her father had stated that the man would be helping the evacuation process. Iris had suggested maybe Barry was helping with the evacuation process, and he’d gone still for a moment. Then had tried calling Barry again. Still nothing.

The earthquake—the bomb, her dad insisted, it was really just some psycho with a bomb—had occurred. They’d watched it via the news crews in helicopters safe above the city, weirdly removed. She’d squinted at the screen, trying to make out the crowds of people running, screaming, crying in a panic down below, trying to see if she could make out a familiar face.

The two of them had sat up through the night. Her father had been on call for the morning, but he’d phoned into Captain Singh requesting off till they could get word back from Barry. It’d been granted. So together they’d watched reports, took turns calling Barry, and waited. When the news had started coverage on the mounting death toll, she’d buried her face in her father’s chest, the tears that had been gathering in her eyes at the awful images spilling over. He’d held her tight to him, rubbed circles in her back. God, what would they have done if Barry had ended up one of those numbers?

By late morning a hotline had been set up for people wanting or having information about loved ones. Her dad had skipped all that, instead phoning in a bit further up the chain of command.

“Quentin? It’s Joe West. I can’t get a hold of my son and—he is?” She’d felt him relax underneath her instantly, telling her just as much as the palpable relief in his tone. Iris had lifted her head, a hopeful look in her watery eyes. “Could you put him on the phone?” With a brief glance to her, he’d hit the speaker button on his.

“Yeah, course,” Detective Lance had been saying, and there’d been a minute or so of background noise as he’d gone to get Barry. Then a muffled, “Kid, you lose your phone or something? Your foster father just called me. Here, we’ll switch.”

Then at last, she’d heard the voice of her best friend. One word. “Joe?”
“Both of us, Bear,” Iris had said, feeling her smile threaten to split her face. “God, we were so worried.”

“What in the hell is your phone off for?” Her father had demanded, though it had lost most of its edge from his own grin. “What have you been doing in all this?”

“Um, relief effort, mostly. Helping man the hotline. I wasn’t hurt. In the quake, or anything.” Barry had sighed heavily. “Sorry, I should’ve called. I’m sorry.”

He’d sounded exhausted, voice thick and wavering. He’d been crying. It hadn’t been hard to forgive him after that.

Over two months later, Barry still looks tired when he meets her in the train station. She’d told him she could find her way back to the apartment on her own, but he’d insisted he couldn’t let her go about the city without escort, even if she isn’t going anywhere near the Glades.

At the least, it lets her come up and hug him faster. “It’s great to see you,” he says, warm if quiet.

“Yeah, well it’d be better seeing you if you didn’t look so awful,” she has to reply. “Have you even been sleeping?”

“Yes,” he tells her, steps to the side and picks up the luggage she’d set down. “But there’s been a lot more crime after the Undertaking. Lot of scenes to process. I mean, we’re barely keeping up with the small crime in the Glades, forget the rest of it. The police don’t have the resources and, well, now the Vigilante’s…gone—”

“Aha!” She exclaims as they emerge onto the open, sunny street, trying to inject as much enthusiasm as possible into her tone in order to counter Barry’s uncharacteristically subdued state. “Knew there was a bigger reason you looked like a kicked puppy.”

“I need a bigger reason than five hundred and two people being killed in one night?”

She grimaces, but does her best to plow on. “You may have stopped talking about him because of dad, but when the Hood or whatever first showed up you were so excited about it. And he saved your life.”

Iris still isn’t sure how she feels—or felt, apparently—about the hooded vigilante. Yes, he saved her best friend which kind of grants him automatic hero status, but the kind of justice he dealt served to create fear rather than hope. She thinks, looking around at the people rushing about with their heads ducked and hardly speaking to anyone else, Starling City could do with a bit more hope. One citizen of Starling City in particular.

She’s got Barry to herself for the whole day, as he’d apparently been forced to request off a week in advance under advice from Lance—an officer now, having been demoted for reasons still not explained to her or her dad—who she’s starting to think might be the only one in this whole city that could approach the term of friend to Barry. He does little to dissuade her of this opinion, taking her straight back to his apartment with no mention of plans or meeting up with anyone else. The apartment itself is a mess, hardly fit for entertaining.

“Well, not that there isn’t enough clutter in here already, but I got you something,” Iris says, pulling it out of her bag. She’s hardly been able to wait this long to give it to him.

And there’s a real smile there on his face, some of that familiar energy returning to him as he rips off the wrapping paper to reveal the book cover. “Oh wow, the Harrison Wells biography!”
"Yeah, it was released as part of the run-up to this particle thing they’re building that you keep going on about every time you come home to see it."

"Accelerator," Barry supplies, eyes already scanning the back cover for the summary and reviews. "Thank you so much. I was going to preorder this, but…"

"I figured you were probably distracted. Like now," she adds with a smirk.

"Huh?" It takes another moment for Barry to drag his eyes back up and notice her amusement. "Ok, fine, I will start this another time."

He goes to get her something to drink while she sets her stuff in the bedroom, Which he’s at least made an effort to tidy up for her. Though the closet looks stuck slightly ajar; when she opens the door, it’s to find a corkboard that he’s tacked a bunch of old newspaper clippings and photos to. Her eyes fall on a very familiar one of Henry Allen, Barry’s father, being led in handcuffs to a squad car.

“Oh Barry,” she sighs. As if he hasn’t been having a difficult enough year as it was. Between this and the Undertaking, is there anything positive in his life?

A knock on the apartment door draws her attention away from her find in the closet, and she hears Barry go to answer it. “Felicity? What are you doing here?”

“Well, you’ve gotten very bad at answering your phone lately, so I thought I’d skip all of that and just try and catch you in, which thankfully I did.” Iris edges slowly into the living room, can just see a very pretty blonde standing on Barry’s doorstep in a cute dress and matching glasses. Matching glasses, she’s adorable. “I mean, really, you’re only a little better than Oliver at this point,” the woman says, but then blanches at the same time as Barry’s face takes on a pained expression. “Who I was not going to mention. At all.”

“Please don’t,” is Barry’s flat response.

“Why? Who’s Oliver?” Iris has to ask, stepping forward.

Barry’s eyes go wide as he turns to her, but not as wide as this Felicity’s, who seems to be tracking Iris’ path from the bedroom to here. “Oh. Wow. Um, is this a bad time?”

“Well, you’ve gotten very bad at answering your phone lately, so I thought I’d skip all of that and just try and catch you in, which thankfully I did.” Iris edges slowly into the living room, can just see a very pretty blonde standing on Barry’s doorstep in a cute dress and matching glasses. Matching glasses, she’s adorable. “I mean, really, you’re only a little better than Oliver at this point,” the woman says, but then blanches at the same time as Barry’s face takes on a pained expression. “Who I was not going to mention. At all.”

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“No!” Barry interjects sharply while it’s all Iris can do to gape, dumbfounded at the blatant insinuation. “No, Felicity, this is Iris West, Joe’s daughter.”

“Barry and I grew up together,” she finally has the presence of mind to say. For once, he doesn’t tack on the not-siblings disclaimer, just nods. “I mean he’s my best friend, and I love him, just not like that. You know?”

“Oh, yeah, totally,” Felicity assures. “Barry’s kind of my best friend, too, and we’re not like that at all either.”

“I’m just going to go ahead and say that you’re definitely allowed to have two best friends,” Barry gives the diplomatic response.

“Just so long as you don’t feel like you have to hide that from said best friends,” she points out. Sure, she might feel surprised, something might be twisting in her gut as she looks at the other woman. Iris has practically never had to share Barry with any friends, let alone a best friend. Still, wasn’t she worried about him being alone in Starling? So Iris smiles brightly. “I’m not going to worry about my ‘position’ in your life. So why don’t you come in, Felicity, fill me in on what else he hasn’t told me. Who’s Oliver?”
She’s walking back into the living room to clear off the coffee table for him, but glances back to catch the panicked look the pair share.

“Mutual friend,” Barry decides. “He moved, after the Undertaking, really far away.”

“I’m sorry,” she offers to both of them. It makes sense that people would be trying to leave the city after the disaster in May. Her father probably would’ve suggested it if Barry’s job wasn’t tied up in the relief efforts. “He must have been a pretty close friend, if Felicity wasn’t even going to mention him.”

Barry’s giving her a look warning her off the topic, and so misses the rather mutinous expression on Felicity’s face as the woman perches on the edge of the couch.

“They weren’t just friends.”

“Yes we were,” Barry disputes sharply as Iris’ eyes go wide.

The blonde woman gives a scoff. “Really? Because you said—”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Felicity—”

“Barry, you said you loved him!” Felicity is back on her feet now, staring down a Barry who looks like he wants to be anywhere but here.

Especially when Iris can’t contain an exclamation of “What?”

He squeezes his eyes shut, flushes red as he turns his face from her, and looks almost angry with Felicity for a moment as he counters heatedly, “Yeah, and he said goodbye.” Then his shoulders slump. “So what’s the point?”

“The point?” It’s Iris who asks. “Barry, the point is you look awful, you’re probably feeling awful, and you’re apparently not talking about it to anyone. Definitely not me, anyway.” She doesn’t bother hiding the hurt this time, and he immediately looks guilty on top of everything.

“I couldn’t…” He looks helplessly at Felicity.

“I’m sorry, Barry,” she says, yet remains resolute, “but it seems like Iris really cares about you enough to come up here. You shouldn’t keep everything from her.”

She’s glad for the show of confidence on Felicity’s part, though she’d rather Barry didn’t keep anything from her. He seems to read that from her face though she doesn’t vocalize it.

“I don’t want you to worry about me or, I don’t know, be upset.” It pains her how much he seems to be struggling to talk to her about any of this.

“Barry,” she steps forward, places a hand on his shoulder. “You know I’d never really be that upset with you, right? Not if it’s about you being yourself, or even liking guys.” There, it’s really out in the open between the two of them, with a little help from Barry’s Starling best friend. “If I’m upset with anybody, it’s this Oliver for totally ditching you after you told him you loved him. What a jerk!”

That gets at least a crooked smile out of him, though he corrects her, “I didn’t actually tell him. Just Felicity.” The other woman shakes her head with an accompanying roll of her eyes.

“But he knows how you feel,” she persists.

“Yeah, I guess,” he replies, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck as he mutters to his shoes, “I mean...
“Wait, what?” It’s Felicity’s turn to exclaim while Iris gapes. “When? How did I miss this?” Honestly, Iris is still reeling from missing her best friend’s recent exploration of his sexuality almost entirely, so she thinks the other woman has a rather minor complaint in comparison.

“After, uh, the Undertaking. Then he left, so, like I said, kind of a moot point.” God, Barry must have really loved this guy. That’s the only explanation if even he, the investigator of the impossible and unexplainable, already wants to throw in the towel. He’s really hurting.

“Where did this guy move?” Iris does her best not to sound too demanding as she rounds on Felicity.

“We don’t know. I’ve been trying to track him—um, through family and normal, legal means—but he isn’t even looking at his phone or email. Or if he is, he’s really good at not reacting because I’ve sent some pretty provocative messages—not that kind of provocative! Just, things that are happening here, that he’s missing. The company I work at starting to go under, another friend of ours breaking up with his girlfriend—”

“Dig and Carly broke up?” Barry looks, if anything, more distressed.

“Like I said, you’ve been almost as bad at the keeping in touch,” the blonde woman scolds. “I nearly just sent Oliver that, that you’re miserable.”

“No, don’t do that,” Iris orders. “Then he wins.”

“Wins?” Barry echoes, incredulous.

“Well, seems to me he did this to hurt you. So if we’re sending him anything about you, it’s that you’re totally fine, because he does not get to have that satisfaction. If we could just find somebody to play along—ooh, my RA from sophomore year might be willing. You remember Casey? Tall, blond hair. Brown eyes, though, sorry. I know you have a type.” A very specific type, really. She thinks Barry must have found just about the only other Oliver in Starling City besides Oliver Queen! Can somebody’s type be just a name?

“The make him jealous scheme? Seriously?”

“It won’t be much of a scheme,” Felicity says wryly. “Pretty sure you’d just have to say hi to someone who isn’t Oliver.”

“Ok, but I’m not actually doing this, guys,” Barry reminds pointedly. “Or we’re not, or—he wasn’t trying to…hurt me,” he argues, dragging a hand down his face.

So she sobers up a bit. “That doesn’t change that he still did, Barry. And even if we’re not scheming anything, you’re going to be ok, alright? New game plan,” she decides. “Now that I actually know what’s really bothering you, we are stocking up on ice cream and brownies and movies, we are going to get through all of them, and we’re going to laugh and cry about all of this until we’re sick. Just like you’ve helped me through all my breakups.”

“We didn’t…I wasn’t even dating him,” Barry weakly protests.

She waves a dismissive hand. “I’ve barely had anything that qualifies as a real, lasting relationship. Didn’t stop you, it’s not stopping me.”

“I’ll just, let myself out then,” Felicity excuses just as it looks like Barry might be about to give in.
When he looks, stricken, between the two of them, Iris is able to swallow any lingering misgivings about sharing. “Whatever’s going to help you feel better, Barry.”

The grateful expression that overtakes his features tells her right away it’s the right decision. “Hey, Felicity?” Barry calls, halting the woman’s progress out the door. “Would you maybe stay? If you don’t have work or anything.”

She turns back. “Do I get a say in movie choice?”

Iris gets to know Felicity pretty well during her stay over food, movies, nerd-talk, and the little bit they actually get to dish on this still-mysterious Oliver. Barry’s wedged between them on the couch most evenings, and if he’s not his usual cheerful self, at the least they’re getting him smiling again. It’s a start.

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John isn’t sure what to expect as he pulls up outside the apartment building. Felicity had told him she’d spent nearly the last week with Barry and his friend Iris, that the scientist was at least open to seeing them. Still, it’s a good sign to spot the young man already waiting on the sidewalk. He gets in the passenger seat, like he always has whenever Oliver’s not there to sit in the back with.

“Hey Barry,” John greets with a brief smile, then checks in the mirror before pulling back onto the street.

“Hey Dig,” Barry says back. Everything from his tone to his posture is sheepish. “Sorry for just… dropping off like that.”

“It’s ok. You needed some space to deal, too.” At least Barry hasn’t completely skipped town to do that.

The younger man snorts. “Yeah, well needing space because Oliver needs space seems pretty hypocritical. And you’re my friend, too. I should be there for you when you’re having a rough time.”

He hadn’t exactly wanted to get into it about Carly today. But he sighs and says, “Carly couldn’t understand my fixation on getting Deadshot. That’s not her fault, and she deserves more than the baggage I bring to our relationship. But that’s the thing, you got to find somebody who can understand you and everything that comes with you. And you and Oliver might have been friends, but I think you both had that understanding, or at least the beginnings of it.”

Barry closes his eyes. “Felicity told you.”

“If by that you mean she told me what happened right before Oliver left, then yes,” he admits. “But I had the rest of it figured on my own.”

The scientist’s face is now a dull red, his voice small. “How are you guys so cool with this?”

“That’s pretty easy as a friend who wants to see you happy,” John replies, having expected this one. “Whomever that’s with.”

“You think I could be happy with Oliver.” It’s not a question, but he can tell Barry’s purposefully making it sound dubious. Like he’s already trying to dismiss the notion, the hope. The first step in getting over anybody, John knows. But he can’t help hoping, perhaps at this point more for Oliver’s sake, that that’s as far as the younger man gets.

In the meantime he asserts, “I think you already were. And I know he was happiest with you,
Barry.” Oliver had known it, too, had been so close to just letting himself have that happiness…it’s killing John to watch him throw that away.

“Then why leave?” There’s frustration and exhaustion there, a question that the younger man has clearly been turning over and over in his head. “It’s not like he couldn’t have seen I—” He falls silent, looking ashamed and tired of the subject.

So all John says is, “That’s something you’ll have to ask him.”

That makes Barry stiffen in his seat, then look around properly at where they’re driving to. “Dig…”

And he winces at the mixture of trepidation and a little bit of hope that’s laced into that one syllable. “It’s not- he’s not back.” Barry’s face almost instantly falls. “But we’re going to change that.”

They pull around the back of the Verdant, and Barry proves agreeable enough to follow him down into their old base of operations. Though it doesn’t look quite as old now, and he watches with some amusement as the scientist’s eyes go wide taking in all the changes. “Why update the Cave?”

“Because it needed to be done,” he answers simply. “And we’ll need to have it ready for when we bring Oliver home.”

The younger man walks down along one side of the tables, comes to a halt in front of a glass case where they’ve placed the Hood’s suit on a mannequin. “Pretty sure that’s going to be easier said than done.”

“Felicity thinks she’s almost got a location.”

“I meant actually bringing him back to Starling, to this,” Barry clarifies, gesturing to the suit. “He said he failed that night, Diggle. Like he didn’t think he could be a hero, or even a vigilante anymore. And he left this behind. Left it all behind…” The melancholy expression overtakes his features again.

John walks up behind him, catches his eye in the reflection of the glass. “We’ve all had our moments of doubt, Barry. Someone’s got to help Oliver through his. All of his doubts.”

Barry doesn’t choose to reply to that. All he asks is, “Where’s the mask?”

“Don’t know,” John tells him truthfully. “Something else you could ask him. Look Barry,” he finds himself saying, when all that’s met with is an uncertain frown “I can’t speak for Oliver. But I’ve been there. Failed at something, with someone. Not Carly,” he adds before the younger man can even ask. But he can’t bring himself say the actual name—Lyla—out loud. “And I did the same thing he did; decided it wasn’t going to work, left a perfectly good thing—a good woman—and went on my third tour in Afghanistan. I listened to my doubts. And now I doubt whether I did the right thing.”

Barry’s finally turned back to look at him, seems to be hanging onto every word. John continues, “But nobody’s ever made me question it. She’s moved on with her life, probably as she should. Maybe you should, too. But I have to think that Oliver…he needs somebody to question his doubts. And that’s always been you.”

“I don’t think it can just go back to how it was, Dig,” the younger man confides.

“Then make it better,” he responds. “Make it what you want. And that starts with getting those answers you want.” After these months of what he’s been put through, it’ll be the least that Oliver can grant him.
Barry looks down for a long moment, then finally lifts his gaze. “Where have you and Felicity been looking?”

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It’s quieter on the island now. So much calmer than when he first washed up on it never dreaming of the people, the conflicts he’d become entangled in. Oliver wishes it was peaceful.

But he still remembers the years of hard fighting, of loss. And if the recollections of his time here before are dredged up during the day, it’s nothing to what he thinks of, dreams of, at night. Merlyn’s chilling last words, watching helpless and too late to do anything as an entire half of the Glades shook and collapsed into fire and rubble.

Barry’s resigned look and teary eyes as he walked up the stairs and out the door.

He thinks if he’d come anywhere but here, he wouldn’t have the strength to stay away. There’s a sense to Lian Yu that after all this time, everything that he’s done, that he’s become, he belongs here. The island is more of a home for the likes of him than Starling can be anymore. Even if he wishes it could be, that he could find home in the promise of a warm, secure embrace, a pair of lips pressed sweetly against his own, and a smile.

These thoughts stay with him until he rises in the morning, starts moving silently through the trees searching for that night’s meal, the stance and mindset of a hunter taking over.

Until one morning, that routine is interrupted by the sound of a plane’s engine rumbling overhead. Not completely out of the ordinary—even this remote outpost can’t completely evade civilization forever—but it’s far closer than any of the others have been, scaring the birds from the trees and the animals back into their hollows or dens. Oliver climbs a tree for a better vantage point, can make out a small plane circling the island overhead. He starts making his way towards the shore, from tree to tree.

It isn’t long before he can hear the sounds of people tramping through the undergrowth, doing nothing to disguise the sounds or their presence. What gives him pause just out of sight of a clearing—practically makes him lose his footing—are the voices.

“What is it?” Feminine, touched with a little anxiety. Felicity.

“Thought I heard something.” A low, quieter mutter, careful. Dig.

“You think it’s him?” Pitched between the two, with something a little like hope. Barry.

Someone starts taking a few hurried steps forward, and Oliver finds himself matching it. His friends, his team—Barry—here on Lian Yu. He thinks he must still be dreaming.

“I don’t know,” comes Diggle’s voice again, and Oliver climbs over to the next branch just in time to see the former solider reach a hand forward as if to stop the scientist who’s gone around him. “But Barry, let me—”

There’s the audible click of a mine at the same time as the younger man’s foot touches down on the ground. His heart stops for a moment.

Barry, his weight resting on a live mine, only turns his head to look at the other two. “Guys?”

Felicity’s hands have flown to her mouth, but Dig holds out a hand to stop her moving forward, then fishes a pocket knife out. He moves around to face Barry and crouches down to sift the dirt and
reveal what Oliver already knows is there. “It’s a landmine.”

The fear ratchets up in Barry’s expression. “Live?”

“Oh please say it’s just a dud,” Felicity chimes in, taking a step closer to her friend despite the danger.

Dig shakes his head. “I’m going to try and disarm it.”

Not safe enough, is the single coherent thought Oliver has amidst the rising panic, and he starts tying his rope to the end of an arrow.

Barry seems to agree with that sentiment and argues, “No, that’s too risky. Guys, just get yourselves out of here, I’ll—”

He is not suggesting what Oliver thinks he’s suggesting. Bow and a single arrow at the ready, Oliver finally reveals himself, commanding, “Diggle! Felicity! Walk away. Barry—don’t move.”

Felicity whirls around, Dig looks up sharply, and Barry turns his head back around, all three with identical expressions of astonishment. Dig’s is the first to change to comprehension, and he gets to his feet, reaching out to pull on Felicity’s arm to get her moving a safe distance. Barry’s head tilts in confusion as Oliver fires off the arrow, but then his eyes widen as Oliver grips the rope and jumps.

The wind is rushing in his ears as he swings in a low arc to the ground, snagging Barry tightly around the waist while the other man lifts an arm to throw around Oliver’s neck just as the momentum starts to carry him back up. The landmine’s detonation behind them and the extra weight forces him to let the rope go and they fall, thudding to the ground with Barry beneath him.

Their legs are in a tangle, chests pressed together with only the thin cotton of the younger man’s t-shirt between them. Barry’s gasping for breath, having had the wind knocked out of him, and Oliver’s arm is still wrapped around his waist, keeping him pulled in snug against him.

At last those green eyes focus on his face, wide, a bit dazed, yet displaying a whole myriad of emotions. All Oliver seems to be able to give back is concern, his free hand reaching up to cup the back of the younger man’s head, checking for any sort of bump or other injury while trailing his fingers through the other’s hair. “Are you alright?” He murmurs, can feel the shared breath between them they’re so close. Barry’s still got his own arm looped around Oliver’s neck and if either of them leaned forward…

The faint blush rising to the scientist’s cheeks tells him he’s had a similar thought. Barry only nods, though, and answers, “Yeah. Guess tree-walking’s a bit safer than the ground around here, huh?”

Here, Lian Yu. Barry is on Lian Yu. His whole team is, and he can spot Diggle helping Felicity to her feet, neither of them making a move to interrupt. None should of them should be here.

But as Oliver gazes down at Barry lying under him with the hesitant beginnings of a smile, all he can think is home.

Chapter End Notes

Right, so just barely getting into "City of Heroes" in this chapter. Felt it was important to show some different perspectives over the time-skip from season one to two. Also, think
it gives people much more of an idea of what's happening with The Flash...more on that to come. But the team, and Barry and Oliver, have been reunited! What may come of that, not to mention the long-awaited talk between the pair? I'd love to hear all of your thoughts on that and this chapter, and thanks so much for reading!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this is likely a chapter you've all been waiting for. That's all I'm going to say, so enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver is a stubborn, stubborn man. Barry doesn’t know how he’s forgotten this even in the months that have passed since he last saw him. Maybe it gets lost along with all other coherent thought in the sudden shock of seeing and feeling Oliver laying over him. Shirtless. He thinks he might lose his breath all over again, just barely manages some teasing remark and a no doubt silly-looking smile.

But, sooner than he’d like, Oliver starts to leverage himself up. Barry shifts his arm to grip the older man’s bare shoulder and pushes off the ground with his free hand. Then they’re both standing, apart, from each other. Even if neither of them can seem to look away.

“You’re a hard man to find,” Dig finally mercifully cuts in, since Barry can’t find his voice again, can’t decide what that stare Oliver’s giving him means.

But the man turns to Diggle, though addresses them all when he says, “You shouldn’t have come here.”

Of course. Barry draws back a step, Oliver’s eyes flickering to catch the movement briefly before the man squares his shoulders and starts walking off through the trees. It’s not exactly an invitation, but Dig follows right away. Felicity gives Barry a sympathetic look before tilting her head in the direction the other two are heading. Barry nods and they move to catch up, one eye constantly on the ground to watch out for more landmines.

Up ahead, Oliver is leading them to some sort of shelter. Overgrown with tree roots, leaves, and overhanging branches, he thinks he can still make out the cabin of a small plane that must have crashed years ago. Upon entering it, it’s clearly been well lived-in. Still is.

“Is this where you lived when you were here?” Felicity is the first to pipe up. “I mean, the first time you were here.”

“For some of it,” is Oliver’s short response. He’s gone and grabbed a shirt, raising his arms over his head to pull it on.

Barry tries not to watch the way it causes the muscles of his torso to ripple. Half in distraction and half in genuine interest, he inquires, “Who crashed here?” There’s so much he wants to know about this island, Oliver’s five years on it. Who taught him about the herbs he brought back with him, gave him his eponymous hood? Whose mask is that down on the beach with an arrow stabbed through the eyehole? Who tortured him?

Oliver looks him in the eye a moment, but says nothing. Barry tries not to sigh, at least not out loud.

Felicity rallies again. “Could you at least pretend like you’re glad to see us? We spent weeks tracking you down, flew halfway around the world. And this morning, we flew in a plane so old I think I was
safer once I jumped out of it.” She certainly hadn’t felt that way when it came to the jumping. Felicity had crushed his hand in a death grip the entire turbulent flight and then balked at the idea of leaving the plane midair. It’d been clear she’d had to be the one to make the tandem jump with Dig. Though Barry had initially been pretty nervous to go it alone, it had helped when the former soldier had simply pushed him out first.

The rush of the wind, falling—fast—had been an unexpected thrill to be honest. Barry had never pictured himself as the kind of guy to enjoy skydiving, but it had been exhilarating.

Now, however, it’s proving far more difficult to achieve anything with Oliver here on the ground. Even if he’s glad to see them, he calls them out on the reason for this visit before they can even address it, and shoots down just about any hope of him taking up vigilantism again, as Barry had feared. “Malcolm Merlyn destroyed the Glades. And the Hood couldn’t stop it. So don’t ask me to put it on again. Ever.”

What gives him more pause are the things they have to tell him of a more personal nature. Dig starts with people themselves. “Your mother’s in prison, Oliver. Her trial’s coming up. Thea’s out on her own for the most part. Tommy’s been trying to help her.”

“But all the bad press has left his family’s company ripe for a hostile takeover by Stellmoor International,” Felicity picks it right up. “They’ve bought up nearly fifty percent of Merlyn Global’s stock and it sounds like Tommy might be about to give in and work out a deal to sell it. He’s lost nearly all his father’s clients and investors and his attempts to retool it as a relief organization have been met with needless to say lukewarm enthusiasm.”

“But that you’ll be in much better of a position,” Felicity admits. “Stellmoor’s so confident they’re about to get Merlyn Global that they’ve turned their sights on Queen Consolidated, too. They’ll gut both companies if they take over, and that means 30,000 people are about to be out of a job at Queen Consolidated alone.” She turns up the wide-eyed stare as she adds, “Including one very blonde IT expert.”

They’ve both made impressive arguments that are clearly having some impact on Oliver if his troubled frown is anything to go on. But then all eyes turn on Barry. Oh, right, he’s probably supposed to add something. Work is not a topic he can use, seeing as Oliver’s apparently dead-set against anything vigilante-related.

So it’s time, then. He’s been equal parts anticipating and dreading it since they located the right island. He clears his throat, jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “Any landmines in the surrounding area?”

Oliver shakes his head and takes the lead out of the plane. He gets weird déjà vu from the looks Dig and Felicity are giving him, though they, like himself, are tinged with a bit more tension than the last time. Nevertheless, seeing as he’s requested this it makes little sense to keep Oliver waiting.

They come to some kind of silent agreement to just walk a bit, at least till out of sight of the plane. Barry lets any residual worry about landmines go, easier in the presence of the other man, and looks about in open interest at the place. It is, admittedly, beautiful, though perhaps because he knows he’s only here for a short trip and not, say, five years.

“Why would you ever willingly come back here?” He has to ask. “It’s just punishing yourself for
"Exactly, Barry," Oliver says, voice heavy with regret. Still, at least this proves they’re able to talk to each other. “I didn’t stop the Undertaking.”

“Yeah, well if everybody else who didn’t stop the Undertaking decided they needed to exile themselves or whatever, there’d be no one left in the city,” he remarks. “But they stayed, we stayed. Because there’s things that can still be done, that have to be done, Oliver. It’s like you said before, sometimes we lose. But if you keep on not doing things, all you’re going to do is lose. Your family, the company, your friends—”

“You?” It’s a single, soft word, so small. Oliver’s watching him with a near devastating expression.

Barry ducks his head, gives it a little shake. Feels a corner of his mouth tick up in some wry humor as he somewhat jokingly comments, “I guess this is the part where I’m supposed to mention Casey.”

“Casey?” Oliver’s voice is sharp and he draws up short.

Barry keeps walking a few steps, allows himself a smirk with the other man unable to see it. “Yeah. Tall, blond. I met him—oh come on, Oliver!” He can’t even try to keep the act up when he glances back over his shoulder and sees the man’s expression has darkened, looking pained with just a bit of anger. “Can you stop treating me like I’m one of your long-lost exes? We kissed once, and then you left. I don’t think I really qualify.”

Oliver’s gaze drops to his shoes at the bitter tone. “I’m sorry about that.”

Barry has to force himself to ask the next question. His throat feels stuck. “The kissing or the leaving?”

Oliver seems to struggle in answering. At least, he opens his mouth and lifts his eyes back up to Barry’s face, only to shut it again. Finally he says, “I should be sorry about both. But…” he takes a couple slow steps up to him, and his eyes focus on Barry’s lips for a long moment. It almost seems to act like a phantom touch, as Barry feels them tingle at the memory. “I can’t ever be sorry for that.”

And something eases within him, the fear and insecurity that’s been building up since he agreed to help Dig and Felicity find their wayward teammate. He’d told the former soldier he didn’t think things could remain the way they’d been between him and Oliver before the kiss, and he’s been terrified for the change. But maybe, it doesn’t have to be a bad change.

“So you weren’t just leaving to get away from me,” he checks, a bit of a grin already coming to his face.

And he feels a little victorious when Oliver at last cracks something of a smile and shakes his head. “Staying away from you might have been the hardest part.” He reaches into a pocket and retrieves a familiar piece of green fabric. It’s taken on the conformity of the curve of Oliver’s thigh rather than his face, but Barry would recognize that material anywhere. A memento now, instead of a mask.

He reaches for it, muttering, “You got it all pressed out of shape.” Focusing on that keeps the pleasant warmth that’s taken over his insides from escaping either through his smile or worse, a blush. His cheeks already feel a little warm.

“IT won’t need to serve that use again,” Oliver reminds. When Barry meets his eyes again the other man has turned serious. “I really mean it, Barry. If I come back to Starling, it won’t be as the Hood.”

Neither of them mention that Oliver only just said back in the plane that he wasn’t coming home, period.
And this is where Dig and Felicity are counting on him. His and Oliver’s talk, if he can call this that, is being forced to the side yet again with barely anything resolved.

“Ok,” he agrees.

Oliver makes a face. “Ok?”

“Yeah,” Barry nods. “There’s no point if you don’t believe in being a vigilante anymore.” He hands back the mask and walks a few paces more, grabs onto a branch above with both hands, stretching his arms for a moment before releasing it. “Do I still believe in it? Yeah, but I can just do my job with the police. Clock in, clock out, cause it really is just a job, isn’t it Oliver?” He turns to lean against the tree itself, crossing his arms. “Maybe there’s a lot we can’t do, a lot of people we can’t help, but since we already failed what’s the point in worrying about it, right? And hey, it leaves my evenings free.”

Oliver’s expression has shuttered almost completely. Barry expects either anger or a cool, dispassionate dismissal of his mocking comments. Instead he gets, “That must make Casey happy.”

“Wait, what?” When he realizes it’s not meant in jest, Barry lets his head thunk back against the tree and squeezes his eyes shut. “I’m not—Casey was one of Iris’ RAs in college that I maybe met once for like two minutes. And yeah, happens to be gay. Thanks to you, I don’t even know what I am.” Barry cracks an eye open, lets it rove up and down that form that’s thrown him for such a loop. “I guess that’s probably not the first time you’ve heard that.”

Oliver makes no denial, but replies, “First time I can say the feeling’s mutual.”

He’s opened both eyes now. Suddenly they’re back to talking about this again, and he feels his heart start to thud along just a little faster. He wets his lips, doesn’t miss the way Oliver’s eyes fix on it, making the pace pick up even more. “What if I maybe wanted to find out? What this is with you?”

“Barry—” Oliver starts, and he can already tell it’s some kind of let-him-down-slowly speech.

“Ok, but let’s just take a look at this for a second. We both like each other. Fact,” he states when Oliver opens his mouth again. “We’re attracted to each other, we like spending time with each other, and we kissed and it wasn’t weird or something we regret. You already agreed, so no take backs.”

When the other man only grudgingly nods, Barry tilts his head, considering, a frown starting to pull at his lips. “Unless that was just a lie to make me feel better.”

“No,” Oliver responds almost immediately with a firm shake of his head, taking a step toward him.

Barry matches it. “Then tell me what the problem is! Cause I’m not seeing it, Oliver.”

Oliver’s lips are pressed tight together, and his eyes are fixed on some point just over Barry’s shoulder. That always seems to happen when he’s about to say something Barry really isn’t going to like. “You met me because of the Hood, Barry. You helping me, the mission, is what brought us together. And that part of me isn’t going to be there anymore.”

It takes him a few moments to say anything at all, because he can’t quite believe it. “You think I only like you because of the Hood. That I like the Hood?” He waits for the other man to meet his eyes before saying, “No offense, the Hood’s kind of a douche.” It’s a shocked laugh that results, one that makes him have to grin because, wow, Oliver’s laugh was not something he’d been even hoping to hear to today. “I like Oliver Queen.”

He doesn’t say love. That feeling hasn’t gone away over the months, but a part of him can’t ignore it’s been months. Months of slogging through cases both work-related and personal, alone, and
wondering what the other man is doing, if they’re ever going to find him, if he’s even alive. If he’s been thinking of Barry as much as Barry’s been thinking of him.

And Oliver still has that sad sort of look to him at Barry’s words. “I’m not much better than the Hood, Barry. And there’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

“I know you’ll help people, Hood or no. I know that you beat yourself up about things that you’ll forgive everybody else for. I know that you care a lot about your friends and family even if you feel like you can’t be honest with them all the time, like how you actually hate the name Ollie but you can’t bring yourself to tell Thea or Laurel.” Oliver’s been listening with almost no reaction to the more general observations, but on that specific his eyes widen.

Barry’s not done. “I know that you stick to your training schedule religiously and that’s why I started coming early on Wednesdays,” he confesses with a sheepish grin, “cause it’s salmon ladder day. But I also know that a whole day of physical training won’t stop you from downing a large shake and a Big Belly Buster with fries for dinner with the team. I know that you’ve never seen Firefly. And I know as much as you try to shut people out, you’ll still do something like buying them a microwave because they had the worst night ever, and it maybe makes them fall way too deep for you,” he wraps up with a bit of a waver in his voice. “Do I want to know more? Yeah. That’s kind of what relationships are for, Oliver,” he insists, because Barry can be just as stubborn if that’s what it takes.

The biggest risk—confessing his feelings in the first place—has already been taken. If he doesn’t follow through, that’ll be it, he’ll have lost any chance before he can ever have one. Oliver’s clearly just going to let it happen, gone is any of the daring or confidence from before the Undertaking.

Right now, if anything he looks dumbfounded as he says, “You still want to try a relationship with me? I hurt you.”

“So I’ve been told by a lot of people, believe me,” he answers, a terse note creeping into his tone. “But you know what, Oliver? You were hurting, too. And you coped with it how you have for the last five years, I get that. Whether you come back with us or not, whether you be the Vigilante again or not, that’s not going to hurt me.”

He gestures to the little distance left between them, the way Oliver has been shifting first forward and then back like he really is struggling to keep away for Barry’s own good or whatever. “It’s this kind of stuff that will. Maybe you think it’s better for you to be alone, but then you can’t expect me to do the same. I’m either going to be with you, or I’m going to get over you,” He has to choke those words out around a lump that’s risen up in his throat, though it’s nowhere near as hard to say as, “You don’t want a relationship? Fine. Just tell me.”

“I can’t tell you that.” Oliver looks like the very idea might be torture.

“Why not?”

“Because it would be a lie. And I couldn’t lie to you about that, Barry,” the older man says with a rueful smile.

He doesn’t share it, for once, remaining resolute as he says, “Then tell me the truth.” And knowing what he does about the other man, he also knows he’ll have to force his hand So he darts in quick, his hands going up to Oliver’s shoulders in a vain attempt to hold him in place as he connects their lips.

He keeps it short, knowing Oliver can easily break free at any point and wanting to end this desperate bid with at least a tiny shred of dignity left. Just the light press of his lips against Oliver’s,
which are neither resisting nor encouraging. His eyes are closed and Barry wants to hope this is more
than just some last gift. Regardless he makes to back out of his personal space.

But he finds there’s little space he can give when the older man chases after his mouth and strong
hands grip his hips. His back hits the tree he’d leaned against earlier. A familiar thrill shoots up his
spine at the sweep of a tongue and like before Barry’s lips part almost of their own accord. This time,
however, Oliver plunges in without reservation.

He’s not a stranger to being overpowered in a kiss—thank you, Becky Cooper—but there’s just
something consuming about being kissed by the other man. He doesn’t know if it is that it’s a man
claiming clear dominance over his mouth or just Oliver, only that he’s losing himself in it, letting out
a long, loud moan before he can realize it. That hold on his hips tightens in response. Oliver’s beard
—more grown out than last time—is scraping against his cheeks and chin. It’s rough but good. So,
so good.

It takes more than a few tries for them to really break apart from lip lock. Barry will pull off of
Oliver’s mouth to take one or two gasping breaths only to have the other man recapture his lips the
moment he thinks he’s gotten enough air, or he’ll drag Oliver back in with hands at the back of his
neck and fingers sliding through the short hair there whenever it looks like he might be about to
manage to stop.

When they finally both do the other man doesn’t go far. He’s practically panting in Barry’s ear,
“How do I still get to have this? It shouldn’t be this easy.”

“Why make it difficult? Is this supposed to be some sacrifice on my part? Cause it’s not,” Barry tells
him firmly as he can while breathless. “Something else you’ve probably heard, you’re a ridiculously
good kisser.”

“If no one’s told you the same, it’s a crime,” is Oliver’s response, and he’s finally let go of those last
vestiges of guilt as far as Barry goes, if that grin he’s wearing says anything. He wonders if it’s as
wide as his own.

“Punishable by arrowing?” Barry can’t help but to tease. He just made out with Oliver on an island
in the North China Sea, how is this his life?

Oliver drops his forehead to Barry’s shoulder for a long moment. “Your turn for the honesty.” Then
he peeks up at him, gaze serious. “Tell me you’re really ok with me not being the Hood anymore.”
He tries to look to the side, but Oliver places a hand on his cheek to make him keep eye contact.
“Barry.”

“As long as you’re ok with it,” he says.

“You think I’ll change my mind.”

“I think there’s a lot going on in Starling right now that you’re not going to like,” he replies
truthfully. “But you should be allowed to figure out what you want to do about it going forward.” He
could tell him about the Hoods, about their violent campaign for retribution. It’s more likely to hurt
than help, however, and Oliver just looks so relieved that he’s not forcing the issue that he continues
right on with, “I’m going to be there for you whatever you decide.”

Oliver rewards him with another kiss, slower but just as deep as the last. Barry wouldn’t be surprised
if the bark of this tree ends up imprinted on his back at this point but can hardly find it in him to
complain.
“I mean, I don’t know how much I can hang around your fancy new office without it looking suspicious, Mr. CEO,” he has the presence of mind to caution when Oliver pulls back again. “So the extra time to spend together in the foundry is something to consider.” The use of ‘foundry’ is very purposeful, just another way of sweetening the deal. He’s got to at least try, right? Though he doesn’t know what Felicity and Dig would think of his tactics.

“Who says we couldn’t spend time together somewhere else?” Oliver counters smoothly, smirking as Barry’s eyes widen. Oliver’s thumb starts to stroke his cheek while the other hand, till now anchored at his hip, begins to trail up and down his side. Despite the perfectly warm climate of the island, Barry shivers. He hasn’t been kissed like this, touched like this in ages. It makes him want to be a little selfish for once.

“We could do that,” he acknowledges, his own hands rising back up into Oliver’s hair. The easy brush of it under his fingers is a feeling he thinks himself unlikely to tire of.

“Barry, there’s a lot of things I have to do when we go back. I need to check in with Thea, I need to secure my position at the company. But I am not putting you last, not anymore. You’ve given me this chance and,” Oliver pauses, seemingly struggling to find the words, “I can’t tell you what it means to me. Let me take you out to dinner.”

It’s official, his face is stuck in a permanent ear-to-ear beam. “Ok.” He’s been saying ok a lot today, way more than he thought he was going to at the start of it. His whole life’s just suddenly turned completely ok. Better than ok.

He just said yes to a dinner date with Oliver. Oh wow. There’s no way this can be his life. If it’s all just some dream, something he’s thinking up on the flight over to Lian Yu, he wants to stay in it forever. Barry surges forward to claim the older man’s lips again, and he beats Oliver to it this time in introducing tongue, gaining an appreciative groan for his efforts. He’d gotten brief impressions of the other’s taste before, but God, Oliver’s mouth is just a pure sensation. He tries to put a name to it and fails. Clearly this just means he has to keep trying.

For now though, he pulls back, licks his swollen, kiss-bruised lips. They feel almost numb. Oliver’s look about the same, but it doesn’t stop him from dipping his head to kiss down Barry’s neck. When he starts nibbling, Barry’s head lolls to the side. “Ohh, Oliver, that’s—ah!” The other man had just caught his Adam’s apple on the last gentle bite and it had sent a strange sort of tickle through him, making him jerk sharply. The pain comes when he knocks his head on the tree as a result.

“You alright?” He thinks it’s the second time Oliver’s asked him that today, and the second time he starts running careful fingers over the back of Barry’s head. The older man is also tugging him forward, wrapping him up with his free arm and rubbing a hand up and down his admittedly sore back, which is rather nice of him considering it’s at least half his fault.

“Yeah. Just, uh, a bit sensitive there. I don’t think in the good way.” He pillows his cheek on Oliver’s shoulder but manages to catch his eye and give a crooked grin. “We maybe have a lot to learn.”

He’d been trying to find purchase in hair that was simply too short and Oliver had had one hand splayed over Barry’s chest as if to try and palm the relatively flat expanse of skin and muscle. It hadn’t quite put the stars in his eyes like he’s fairly sure it would for someone with breasts. That’s not to say that it hadn’t at the least been somewhat stimulating…

Nevertheless, their mutual lack of experience with another man is starting to show. Which is kind of a relief, to be honest, since Barry’s absolutely certain that Oliver would be otherwise way more
experienced and better at just about all of this compared to him. Now they’re just both awkward.

Oliver gets something of a grimace as he seems to be coming to a similar conclusion, and Barry can’t help laughing, which Oliver joins him in doing after holding out for maybe half a second. “Well,” the man says once that’s subsided, easy smile turning predatory as he murmurs into Barry’s ear, “I’m looking forward to it.” Then he’s nibbling, again, on the ridge of Barry’s ear.

He’s got to say something about this, like should he maybe be worried, but instead it turns into a gasped, “Could we just skip the dinner?”

He can feel the rumble of a chuckle starting up in Oliver’s chest. But it gets cut off by another voice intruding with, “Guys? Dig says we seriously need to get going if we don’t want our ride to leave without us.”

They drop the embrace and Barry’s stumbling back a couple steps right before Felicity comes trampling into view through the trees, Dig himself not far behind. It doesn’t do much good. Felicity gives a little “Oh!” and turns red, while Diggle is raising a brow and eyeing Barry’s neck on the side Oliver had applied his ministrations. Oh. He slaps a hand over it and presses his lips together, feeling his face heat up as well.

All the former soldier says to Oliver is, “You got anything in that plane you want to bring with us?”

There’s a grateful look that flashes in Oliver’s eyes, and Barry himself relaxes. Why had they even been trying to hide from the other two? “I’ll just be a minute,” the other man answers with a nod. He heads past them and out of sight.

“Well, he’s coming back with us. That’s a good start,” Felicity comments. “Did he say if the Hood was coming back, too?”

“Oh,” Barry rubs at the spot on his neck and drops his gaze to the ground. “I got distracted.”

“Uh-huh.” It takes him a second and a glance up at her face to recognize the quaver in her voice as a suppressed laugh. Dig is shaking his head though he looks more amused than disappointed.

“It wasn’t exactly a no, the last time. He just kind of…dodged it.” Dodged it with an offer of dinner and those amazing lips, he doesn’t say. He has a feeling they can guess the gist of it, though.

Oliver’s back before anything else can be said, however, with a bag hanging from one shoulder. “I know a safe path to the shore, so follow me,” he cautions the whole group. Then walks right up to Barry and squeezes his shoulder once. “And stick close.”

Maybe they’re not bringing the Hood back to Starling City yet, but they’re bringing Oliver and that’s the part of the man that counts.

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They end up going around the other half of the world and springing for a private plane from Europe back to Starling. Appearances need to be kept up after all, if he’s going to present himself as the future CEO of the family business.

The multiple time zone changes have caught up to two of their group. Across from him, Felicity is reclined back in her seat with both her and Diggle’s pillows cushioning her head. She’s entrusted the man with her glasses in exchange and her hair is out of its customary ponytail to accommodate the position.
Barry has the window seat beside him. The scientist had been excited about flying over the Rockies, but though his head is leaned against the windowpane he’s definitely going to miss it fast asleep like that. Oliver doesn’t wake him, only pushes the armrest between their seats up and shifts him to rest against his shoulder instead, seeing as it’s far more comfortable. Judging by the sleepy murmur and the way he nuzzles into the crook of Oliver’s neck, the younger man thinks so too. He lets his arm curl around Barry’s back, his fingers fanning out over his hip.

There’s been more than one incident when he’s held Barry, had his arms around him. But now there’s no need for pretense, no wishful thinking or longing to cheapen the moment. He can reach out and touch him whenever he wants or needs, kiss him just because he can and Barry likes it. Will kiss him back, again and again, like he’s starved for it.

They both were for many long months. Oliver only has himself to blame for that. So he presses a kiss to the sleeping man’s forehead and promises himself never again. Barry’s been too good to give him a second chance, to persevere for both their sakes to risk giving it up again, for anything.

“You know, it’s going to be just as hard maintaining a double-life as the CEO of Queen Consolidated,” Diggle speaks up from his spot next to Felicity, just as wide awake and aware as Oliver. “Maybe even harder.”

He looks to his friend. “So I should just add the Hood as another complication?”

“You’re never going to be able to completely leave it behind. Not if you’re really serious about Barry. He’s connected to that part of your life, Oliver,” is the frustratingly true response. Dig himself seems frustrated as he asks, “You’ll date Helena and you’ll date McKenna while you’re the Hood, but now that you’re with someone who actually knows about all that and supports it, you don’t want to?”

“I think we already established that my being with anyone while I’m the Hood doesn’t exactly work out.”

It goes against the mentality of putting that hood on. When he goes out on those missions it’s a matter of survival, kill or be killed. Anything else is a distraction, and Barry would be a greater one than all others. Dig just doesn’t understand; he can’t be the Hood and be with Barry. The person who started his father’s mission nearly a year ago is entirely at odds with the person the younger man makes him want to be now.

“Yeah, well I’m pretty sure you know what I think about that ‘avoiding entanglements’ policy,” the other man reminds. “It doesn’t really work.” He nods at Barry as if to point out Exhibit A. It’s a good case to make, as all the while Oliver had been denying close relationships with anyone else he’d let himself get more and more wrapped up in the scientist’s cheerful air and kind eyes, a balm against the violence and corruptions of Starling’s underworld that had surrounded him nightly. He’s no doubt he’ll need it just as much in the corporate world.

“I don’t have much of a policy or mission for the Hood anymore, Dig. I didn’t stop the Undertaking, and crossing the rest of the names off that list will do nothing for the city now.”

Diggle’s stern expression lessens as he says, “Look Oliver, I don’t doubt that you’re going to do what you can as CEO to help out. But there’s still a lot of good you could do and a lot of people you can help as the Hood that Oliver Queen can’t. Like how you stopped Vertigo, rescued those hostages,” he starts to list. “Those sort of things mean something to people, just like Barry said when he joined up.”

“Barry is perfectly fine with me not continuing as a vigilante,” he replies pointedly, though leaves off
Dig still looks unimpressed. “Don’t you think he’s a little too terrified of losing you again to really be speaking his mind right now? It wouldn’t be the first time you give him everything he wants only to take it away.”

That hurts, like Dig probably knew it would. As happy, practically radiant, as he’s made Barry today, he’ll have to live with knowing these last few months he’s been nothing but a source of pain.

Oliver lets the hand that’s been resting on Barry’s hip rub up and down his side, smiles soft and brief when he shifts just that closer in his sleep. “I’m making him a priority from now on, John.”

“That’s good,” the other man acknowledges with a nod.

“But?”

“But once he gets used to that, he’s going to feel pretty bad knowing that’s why you’re not being the Hood.”

He frowns, thinking of Barry’s hesitance, the way he’d talked around Oliver’s question, though still clearly predisposed towards Diggle and Felicity’s point of view. They’ll have to address it again at some point. How will the scientist take Oliver’s careful arguments?

Diggle’s not done. “The Hood’s the whole reason the two of you got close in the first place.”

“And I need this to be about more than the Hood or the mission, alright? Maybe he can’t be part of my work at the company or my family the way I’d want, but I need something real in my life. Something for Oliver Queen to stay for,” he tells him. Oliver wants to know just as many random little details about Barry as Barry knows about him, wants to listen to him ramble about old Spanish kings or compressible micro fabrics or whatever he finds fascinating that day, wants to explore every little part of his body that makes him gasp and moan like that—and all of it has absolutely nothing to do with the Hood.

“It doesn’t have to be separate,” Dig tries.

“For me, it does.” He can’t go on being a killer, even one that some might call a hero, while moving forward in an actual, serious relationship. Shouldn’t Barry want more, deserve more than a murderer? He can confidently quell any protest the younger man might have when it’s him he’s doing this for.

Diggle heaves a sigh, signaling his giving up for the time being. He wears a softer look as his eyes fall to Barry tucked in at Oliver’s side. “Yeah, well, just think about it.” Then he stands, passing over Felicity’s glasses for the moment as he goes to check with the pilot.

The woman herself stirs not a minute later, probably due to all the movement around her, hand reaching out blindly to where Dig was before sitting straight up, eyes wide.

“Here,” Oliver says, holding out what she’s no doubt searching for.

“Oh, thanks. Thought I lost them.” She slips them on, then smiles when her eyes refocus on the pair of them across from her. “That’s good. Barry hasn’t been getting much sleep lately—I mean between looking for you and work. Not anything else. The police, they’ve just been really busy.”

His answering smile is half grin, half grimace. He’s certainly missed Felicity, along with everyone else he left behind after the Undertaking, and her habit of saying what’s on her mind without quite
thinking it through all the way has always amused him. Then again, her reference to Barry’s work is not at all subtle.

He chooses to address her slip-up instead, inquiring, “So ‘Casey’ wasn’t your idea?”

Her mouth falls open. “Did he really? Oh, I would pay money to see the face you made. Iris is going to be so proud.”

“Iris?” He echoes, a bit sharper than he means to. His hold tightens around Barry as he asks, “You met her?”

“She stayed with Barry for about a week a couple months back,” Felicity informs him. “Ooh, that is also a good face. A good angry, kind of panicky face.”

“Did you know he used to be in love with her?” Oliver feels he has every reason to be kind of panicky. Just what all has he missed?

“Did you know I was a little bit crazy about you when we first met?” She returns. He blinks, unsurprised but unsure of why they’re actually talking about this now. Felicity’s shoulders slump. “Right, of course you knew. You know everything. Anyway, it was just kind of funny and nice even if it was a little weird at first, Oliver Queen coming to me for all these strange tasks, talking to me. I felt special.”

“You are special,” he tells her honestly.

She smiles, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks. Thing is, then I found out just how special you are. Or some of it, I still don’t know all of it, none of us do. That’s a problem for me, relationship-wise,” she admits. “I told you, when I gave you Walter’s copy of the list, I didn’t know why I trusted you. I don’t like not knowing things, uncertain probabilities. I’m glad I took the chance that time, believe me, but I still can’t help wondering things about you, and worrying about them. I’d have to know them, to be that close to you.”

He thinks of McKenna and her probing questions on their first date, how he’d felt backed into a corner with no clear exit.

“But Barry just trusts and hopes, without question. It’s his way,” Felicity continues. “And if you give back just a little of that, then he’ll do anything. He’ll go halfway around the world for you, Oliver, or run the coms for a hundred thousand missions.”

“Felicity,” he warns.

“I’m just saying that you don’t have to worry about Iris when it comes to Barry and you don’t have to worry about Barry when it comes to being a vigilante,” she states nonetheless. “You need to figure out what’s really stopping you, Oliver.”

He holds her gaze for a long moment before nodding once, which seems to satisfy her as she settles back into the seat.

Diggle makes a timely, he thinks purposeful, reentrance. “Pilot says ETA’s just under two hours. We’re not expecting turbulence, but he asked us to strap in just in case.”

“Yeah, the Rockies can be pretty bad sometimes,” Felicity remarks, adding for their benefit, “I had to flyover every time I went to college and back.”

He’ll have to move his arm to buckle in, not to mention Barry needs to as well, so first he moves his
hand up to the younger man’s shoulder. “Barry,” he says in his ear, a bit soft at first, not likely to
wake him from such a heavy sleep. Oliver repeats it once and then twice as he finally gives into the
impulse of bringing his free hand up to trail through the man’s already tousled hair.

“Huh?” Barry manages around a yawn. Green eyes, a little fogged at first, blink up at him. “Oh.
Hello.” An easy, infectious grin stretches over his face before he sits up and stretches out his limbs as
well. “Are we here?”

“Not for another two hours,” Dig tells him.

“You just needed to buckle in,” Felicity adds as she does so.

Barry moves to do the same, lowering the armrest between them back down even as he asks,
“Why?”

“Because you’re about to miss those mountains you wouldn’t stop talking about,” Oliver can’t help
the light tease, biting down on a laugh as Barry gives a jolt in surprise.

“Oh!” Almost instantly his face is back up against the window. Oliver shakes his head, and isn’t the
only one. Then he notices how Barry’s hand is laid out on the armrest, palm up and fingers splayed
wide. It doesn’t seem on accident.

He stares at it a moment longer, then hesitantly, experimentally places his own hand over top. And
no natural wonder can beat the beauty of how Barry instantly curls his fingers up to lace with
Oliver’s, or the brilliant smile he flashes him.

There’s so much waiting for his arrival; people, tasks, decisions. He’ll face them all, just as long as
he has this.

Chapter End Notes

Did I make you all happy? I hope so. Maybe Oliver’s still holding out about being the
Vigilante again, but we’ll see if he changes his mind once he gets back to Starling and
sees what’s been going on. Thanks so much for reading and I’d love to hear any
thoughts!
Chapter 23

Firstly, let me apologize. This chapter is long, long over due. I never intended for this story to go on so long un-updated, and for your patience and understanding you all deserve an explanation.

For about the last year I’ve been struggling with depression and my identity and things sort of came to a head a few months ago. I’ve gotten help, so please don’t feel badly or like you have to worry about me, but the reason for my hiatus was that I was fundamentally unhappy lying to myself and others about who I am. This last week I came out to two of my sisters (who read my works on this site) as a transgender man. It’s the start of a process that I know will be long and ultimately don't know where it will end, but I am still the same person and writer, and my commitment to this story and my other works has not changed.

I’m going to try and respond to each of the comments you all left in my absence, and am also considering joining tumblr in order to make myself more accessible. Again, I’m truly the most sorry for making all of you worry about me.

That all being said, I hope that you all can (finally) enjoy the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Quentin doesn’t have to have his badge to know that something’s changed. And for the better. About damn time.

In these hectic months since the Undertaking, he’s seen Allen exhausted, overworked, and downhearted. Today, the kid comes back from vacation with a spring in his step and a smile bright enough to beat back even the gloomy air around the precinct.

“What’d you do, take a round trip to Hawaii?” He stops by the little lab to ask once he figures the CSI’s had time to get resettled.


Quentin points it out. “You brought the sun back with you.”

“Oh!” The kid brings a hand up to his face, like he hadn’t even realized he’d been doing it. Sure, Allen’s one of those types that’ll smile at a person as soon as look at them, but not lately. “Sorry. I just was visiting with a, um, a friend.” The smile turns a touch reminiscent and Allen starts fiddling with a test tube absently.

“A friend,” he repeats. “Anyone I know?” Sure, he feels like he’s carrying on a mostly one-sided conversation, but Quentin’s hopeful he knows the reason for Allen’s vagueness. The kid’s the best bet he’s got for any news about the Hood. The original, at least, and the one this city could stand to see a good bit more of, funny as it is that he feels that way now.

Allen had assured him the Vigilante hadn’t been killed by Merlyn or the quake, but was nonetheless ‘done’ with his less than legal work. The CSI had looked so morose when he’d told him and up till now, so he figures only some kind of positive meeting with the formerly hooded man could leave him this cheery.
It could also just be wishful thinking on Quentin’s part. But after that attack last night—the mayor assassinated and Laurel almost hurt again—he’s willing to wish for once.

Before Allen can get his head out of those clouds he’s stuck them in long enough to answer him, Hilt pokes his head into the lab. “There’s been a Hoods attack at Queen Consolidated, Quentin. Need another cop or two.” His old partner’s been pretty generous to him since his demotion. Even if he doesn’t agree with everything Quentin did leading up to the Undertaking, he still tips him off on the occasional case like this.

Allen’s scrambling up from his desk, smile finally dropped. “Uh, Detective Hilton, do you still need a CSI?”

“Sure, Allen,” Hilt agrees readily enough. As much as Quentin’s reputation has sunk since the Undertaking, Allen’s has risen. The kid’s been throwing himself into work, hardly taking a day off aside from when his foster sister came to town and then this latest vacation. And he’d been right to tell Laurel before, though ‘bright’ doesn’t cover it. Allen’s brilliant. His sobered mood of the last few months has finally let others—and with a note of chagrin he recognizes he’d be one of them if not for his unique circumstances—see that.

But Quentin thinks he can see what has Allen so eager to get himself on this particular case and nervous even as he follows Quentin out to the lot. On the drive over, he checks, “She works in IT, right? Smoak?”

Allen gives a start. “Um, yeah.”

“Then she’s probably fine. The Hoods’ve only been going after the financial sector till last night. Course now they’re getting bolder, but that’s a problem for the billionaires that run these places to worry about, not her.”

Figures it’d be Queen first. Seems like every time the guy comes back from somewhere somebody’s got to try and take a shot at killing him. If Quentin were still a detective, he’d have assigned a protective detail to the sister and Merlyn these last few months. It’s a miracle no one’s tried to retaliate by going after one of them yet.

In the passenger seat, Allen only looks marginally less anxious, staring out the window and fingers drumming on his knee.

And maybe he is right to worry, because when they arrive Felicity Smoak is right in the middle of all of it, standing a few feet from the heir to this ‘family business’ as it’s called. Quentin, like Allen, makes his way over to the blonde.

“Felicity, hey, are you ok?” The kid starts off with, anxious eyes flicking to her boss for a brief moment, possibly worried about tipping Queen off to just how he knows the IT expert. There’s not much cause for fear there, as the billionaire is talking to that Isabel Rochev woman. As if she hasn’t been doing enough badgering his daughter’s current boyfriend to death.

Felicity Smoak offers a reassuring smile and looks fairly unruffled besides. “I’m fine, Barry. Oh, and Detective Lance. I still can’t get used to you in that uniform.”

“It’s ‘Officer’ now,” he reminds. “Just glad it still fits, and that you weren’t hurt. Now listen,” he guides the two of them to turn slightly from the other occupants of the room and, voice pitched low, asks, “have either of you, uh, heard anything from our mutual friend lately?”

Since he’s got them both here now he might as well take the opportunity to ask. Allen’s mouth opens
and closes like he’s trying to find a response, but Smoak promptly replies, “Nope. In fact I keep waiting for him to show up.”

“Felicity,” Barry starts, a bit pained, though falls silent when she gives him a look. Then with a look to Hilton, both men mutually decide to get down to work.

The whole thing’s discouraging to say the least. An attack in broad daylight only means these vengeful thugs calling themselves vigilantes for justice are just getting bolder. And now that Quentin’s in a place where he can admit there are some things the police can’t handle alone, of course the Hood seemingly wants nothing to do with it.

Allen is apparently determined at least to find out who these new Hoods are. He’s looking over each tiny shard of glass searching for some speck or strand of evidence. It doesn’t look like he’s about to wrap up any time soon, and Quentin’s got to start his patrol. Hilton, having interviewed everyone present, has already gone as well as the other beat cops.

Quentin clears his throat and motions the owner of this building over, from where he’s been standing near the wall with his bodyguard and Smoak. “Something I can do for you, Officer Lance?”

“Yeah, just a small favor. Our CSI, Allen over there—”

“We’ve met,” Queen tells him before he can point the kid out. Quentin blinks, then thinks back to that day Allen’s foster family came into town. Queen had been at the station for something, hadn’t he? The details elude him months later, but it checks out, so he gives a nod.

“Right, well, he’ll probably stick around here for a bit. Shouldn’t be any trouble to you. You just have someone tell him to give the station a call when he needs a ride back.”

Leaving Allen behind still does twist something in his gut unpleasantly, but then it’s replaced with surprise when Queen offers instead, “I can arrange for his transportation back, Officer, there’s no need to bother the station.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. On behalf of my family’s company I want to extend any assistance and offer my sincerest hopes that these people are caught by the proper authorities,” Queen replies, level and pleasant, absolutely the picture of a respectable CEO. The man sure knows how to turn on a dime, considering last year he was having house arrest parties and boozing his way through Queen Consolidated dedication ceremonies. But he’d started to notice the changes in Queen even before the Undertaking forced him to take on this new position.

So he simply says, “Appreciate it.” Talking with the man so civilly after years of cursing his very name is an adjustment to put things lightly, and he’s itching to get on his way. Though he advises, “Might just want to leave a note for Allen. He gets lost in his head sometimes, won’t hear you.”

Quentin just happens to catch Queen looking away from the kid, the remnants of a softer smile fading from his features. “I’ll make sure he gets the message. Thank you, Officer Lance.” Polite though the tone is, it’s clearly a dismissal, particularly as he keeps his body turned toward the interior of the room. Toward Allen, even, like he’s not even planning on leaving, like he’s going to deliver the message himself.

He can’t figure out this new Oliver Queen at all, Quentin reflects as he’s exiting the building. Everyone in Starling seems to be changing these days. But he’s still hoping whoever and wherever the Hood is, he might be willing to change back.
Oliver manages to wait until Lance is out of sight before crossing the room in three strides to get to Barry. He’d never have thought he’d be fortunate enough to get to see the younger man while at the office already, though unfortunate in how it happened.

The scientist is half-crawling under the table on the hunt for more glass shards, it seems, and he’d much rather just be happy that circumstances are allowing him to appreciate the view, perfectly free to do so now that only those who are in the know remain. Earlier he’d had to place himself by the far wall with Dig and Felicity to keep his distance from the younger man. Of course when Lance had called him over purely to talk about Barry it had taken every ounce of control in Oliver to keep his focus on the officer and not on the tantalizing sight of Barry bent over, lips pursed in concentration, jeans showing off the perfect curve of his backside. God, it’s embarrassing how much he loves watching Barry work.

He only gets to witness Barry on hands and knees now for another few seconds before the ding of the elevator outside seems to act like some sort of cue. Oliver had truly thought the younger man was lost somewhere in that brilliant mind of his like Lance had said, but that’s clearly not the case when he’s scrambling to his feet and pulling Oliver into a tight hug.

“Barry, hey,” is all he can manage, bewildered and arms hovering just an inch away from the other before coming to his senses and returning it.

He’s glad he does when the scientist says with palpable relief, “They said the attack was here and I- I just had to know you were ok.”

Oliver feels a sort of warmth wash over him even as he shakes his head at such worries. “Of course I’m ok,” he tells the other man, soothing as he can make it and rubbing a hand up and down Barry’s back. “You know I can handle myself.”

“Well considering you also could’ve handled those guys and didn’t,” Felicity pipes up, marching over with a disapproving frown on her ordinarily cheerful face. “I don’t blame Barry for being worried. You could have stopped those guys.”

Barry lets go and steps back, leaving Oliver free to irritably counter, “Not without giving Isabel Rochev and the Hoods a pretty good idea of what I can do.”

“Yeah, but you have to admit, so does Tarzan-ing with Felicity,” Barry points out. Oliver shoots him a look, betrayed, to which the other man holds up a hand. “I’m not saying you shouldn’t have.”

“I think what we’re all saying, what we’re wondering is whether you avoided taking those Hoods on,” Diggle adds his own voice to the mix. “But they came after you, Oliver. Probably will keep coming after you. You could have taken them out now.”

“No, I couldn’t, Diggle,” he stresses, presses his lips tight together in growing frustration. “Look, there’s a part of being the Hood that none of you seem to be considering. The body count. When I put that hood on it’s kill or be killed.”

“No it’s not,” Barry calls him out, flatly stating, “Or you would have killed me in that warehouse.”

Oliver flinches and feels the color drain from his face, then clamps down on his expression just as he forces himself not to go back to that night in his head. He tries not to let any of the shame or fear enter his tone because he needs to make this clear to Barry, whatever the consequence. “I seriously thought about it.”
Felicity is looking between them with wide eyes and sudden uncertainty, but Barry doesn’t even blink before demanding, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“What I know,” Dig interrupts his shock and incredulity—because how could Barry know that and still be able to even look at him?—to say, “is that you choose whether or not to kill when you put that Hood on, Oliver. And excuse me for saying this, but since when did you care?”

“Since five-hundred and two people died, Diggle. Since I killed the father of my oldest friend and it did nothing.” He went to check on Laurel after the attack last night, but didn’t see Tommy there and has absolutely no intention of meeting up with him anytime soon. Not when he knows there might be hate rightfully in the man’s eyes. “Maybe I shouldn’t have gone back to the island, but right now I am trying to save my family’s company. If that’s not what this is about, then I’m going to talk to somebody who will help me with that.”

He’s out in the hall before any of them can say another word, making quick strides to the elevator.

“Oliver, wait!” It’s Barry’s voice that calls after him as he steps inside. He turns and makes to hit the ‘close doors’ button but can’t bring himself to do so as the younger man comes running up and darting inside.

“Didn’t you have evidence to collect?” He opts to try dismissing instead.

“Oh, the scene was totally contaminated by the cops and your staff. No offense,” Barry adds as the doors slide shut. Then his lips quirk up in a little smile as he says, “I just needed an excuse to stick around so I could see you.”

It is taking everything in Oliver to remember that he’s just as annoyed with Barry as he is with Dig and Felicity. “To see me or to gang up on me with the others?” The scientist looks to be having trouble coming up with a reply.

“It wasn’t ganging up, exactly,” he finally settles for.

Oliver turns, places his hands firmly on the other’s shoulders. “Barry, I need you on my side for this.”

“I am on your side, Oliver,” Barry tells him earnestly. “As long as—”

He’s cut off by the elevator’s ding and the opening doors. With a shared grimace, Oliver drops his hold and Barry steps back. They’re not free to talk again until they’re both in the car, but once they are the other man starts right back up again.

“As long as your side is about helping people, which it totally is. Because that’s why you grabbed Felicity and got her to safety instead of fighting the Hoods, that’s what you think about before any of that ‘kill or be killed’ crap, that’s what you love doing.”

“I don’t love being that person who could have killed you,” he says, eyes glued to the road and voice a quiet murmur like that makes it not as real.

“But you didn’t. You never were that person, Oliver.”

“I want to be better. For you,” he confesses. They’re at a red light and he risks a look at the man. Barry’s eyes are wide, his mouth a little ‘o’ of surprise. With Oliver holding his stare he seems to realize it’s sincere and a little bit of color rises to his cheeks as his features soften into a smile. He places his hand over Oliver’s resting on the gear shift and gives it a light squeeze.
“Then be better. But be yourself, too.”

A number of loud honks intercede before he can give into the impulse to just kiss the other man already, alerting him to the fact the light has changed. With another shared grimace he refocuses his attention on the road while Barry regretfully removes his hand.

“So who are you going to talk to about the company?” The scientist asks to clear any lingering tension. “Or was that just an excuse to ditch us?”

“If it was, it didn’t work very well,” he remarks. The wry note in his voice is dropped as he answers, “I’m going to visit my mother.”

Out of the corner of his eye he sees Barry turn fully towards him, openly displaying concern. “Do you want me to come with you? Not to see your mom, I mean, it’s not like I know her or anything—but I could catch up with my dad while you’re doing that. It can be kind of hard…the first time.”

There’s a strange bundle of mixed-up feelings that results within Oliver. It’s unsurprising he feels touched by the other man’s show of support and consideration. Yet imagining Barry as a child, going to see a father only he believed was innocent, it pulls at something in him and his voice is a bit rough when he asks, “Wouldn’t that be keeping you from your work too long?”

And it’s gratifying to hear Barry say, “Well, I’ve only been assigned the one case so far, which you know has basically no leads I can follow up on. And I haven’t really been able to concentrate today.”

He chances a glance to see Barry’s smiling at him, the kind that stretches across his whole face and causes his eyes to crinkle at the corners. Oliver’s not sure how he can be expected to concentrate either, much less on driving.

“I don’t want this, us, getting you into trouble at work,” he hates himself for saying.

There’s just the slightest pause, and even if he’s trying to hide his disappointed expression Oliver can still hear it in Barry’s tone when he replies, “Yeah, yeah you’re probably right.”

Oliver pulls off onto one of the side streets they use to drop Barry off and is glad to be able to finally focus his full attention on the other man. “Barry, I’m not trying to send you away. I just know if I let this happen right at the start, I’m not going to be able to keep myself from spiriting you away from work halfway through the day every day.”

He can see that once again he’s surprised the man. The admission has brought that same light blush to his face and his expression is some mixture of disbelief and amazement. “You kind of are an all-or-nothing guy,” Barry finally says, a bit teasing, taking some of the intensity out of the moment. Oliver feels both frustration and fondness at it, but before he can say anything the other man’s asking, “Will you at least call me if you need to talk to somebody after? I should be off by then.”

“Meet me at the Verdant after your shift,” he decides after a moment’s thought. “The club, not the foundry. Then we can talk.”

“It’s a date,” the scientist replies with an impish grin at the clichéd phrasing. Well, there’s a good reason not to bring Barry along; he doesn’t know if he could live down the man calling a prison visit their first date, even in jest.

“Not quite,” is what he says aloud to Barry, who looks confused and a little unsure so he clarifies, “I promised you a dinner for that date.”

The scientist relaxes at that, though checks, “You know, I don’t really care where it is, right?”
“Is that you giving me free reign to pick the venue?” He can’t help but tease.

“Pretty sure you were planning on doing that without my go-ahead.” Barry notes dryly. He can only grin shamelessly in reply. The younger man ducks his head with a little shake, then does a double-take at the time on the car’s clock. “Hey, you’ll want to get going now to make it before visitation closes. You really are bad at getting rid of me.”

He chuckles at the joke, but even as Barry’s reaching for the door handle Oliver takes his other wrist. “I knew that from day one, at least.”

Then he leans across the space and claims a kiss. Around them, the street is empty and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t get at least one before they part. Barry happily reciprocates with soft, warm lips that are steadily becoming more and more familiar to him.

It’s the scientist who pulls back first, though not far and he’s smiling. “Still kind of the opposite of getting rid of me.”

“Maybe because I don’t really want to,” he says truthfully and gets a grinning kiss for it. It should be awkward, or at least strange, but feeling that infectious smile against his lips makes him think ridiculous things like that he truly knows what it is to touch the sun. Awful, corny lines he would have used in years gone by to lure some party girl to bed, yet now Barry is making him feel. Effortlessly. God, he needs to get a hold of himself.

A peek at the time again out of the corner of his eye has Oliver deepening the kiss for a single long moment before breaking it off. “Meet me at the Verdant,” he reminds softly. “You can tell me all about how unproductive your workday was.”

“And somehow you’re still maintaining the police don’t need help from the Vigilante,” Barry marvels and adds, “I’ll only help stoke your ego if you tell me about convincing your mom to be the shadow CEO behind bars.”

He rolls his eyes. “Deal.”

With a last little peck to the corner of his mouth, Barry is out the door at last. Oliver spares an extra minute just to watch him go. If he has to break the speed limit to reach Iron Heights in time, it’s easily worth it.

Oliver’s feeling considerably better about most things once he’s spoken with his mother. He has a workable plan to save the company, a quick call to Walter’s new office giving him an appointment first thing in the morning. He’s also heading over to meet up with Barry. Maybe he’ll run a few restaurant options by the younger man, liking the idea of the other’s eyes widening at the high-end establishments. He’ll likely protest, say they’re too expensive. And admittedly it would take a lot of maneuvering on his part to make sure they wouldn’t be seen by the public.

His musings are cut off by the buzz of his cell phone, though he has to smile at the caller ID: Barry. “I’m on my way over now—”

“Great,” the younger man interrupts, a tension in his voice that has Oliver already accelerating just a little more. “Listen, don’t be mad, but we’re in the foundry.”

“We?”

“Felicity and me. Dig’s in the club trying to get more information, but Oliver there was a Hoods attack. They took hostages. Oliver, I’m sorry—”
“Who, Barry?” His knuckles are white around the steering wheel.

“…Thea and Tommy.”

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They’re both silent, sitting back to back inside a church of all places, but Tommy can feel Thea shaking behind him. Maybe it’s him, too.

And tonight the young woman he used to know as a girl called Speedy is far surpassing him in bravery, particularly when she raises her head to speak against their captors when they hurl abuse at the name of Moira Queen. He can understand her need to defend her mother, but he can equally understand why these men don’t exactly like her doing that.

“Ok, but listen, neither of us are our parents,” he finally tries to intercede as the armed men grow increasingly agitated. “We didn’t know about their plans, we didn’t help them in any way. Killing us isn’t going to get you your justice.”

“And why should we believe you, hey? Merlyn?” The name is said with an accompanying spit at his feet and right now is the worst time to flinch but he does it anyway.

“That’s up to you,” is the only response he has. He draws in a breath and continues, “But, if you choose not to, then please, let her go—”

“Tommy!” Thea shouts in his ear in protest, but he keeps right on going.

“She wasn’t even out of high school when it happened, you have to know she wasn’t involved.”

Though he’s keeping his gaze lowered a quick peek through his lashes shows one man is clearly wavering. He can only hope it’s enough for Thea’s sake, Thea who’s just been trying to make the most out of her life after her mother being jailed, after overcoming a drug addiction only Oliver noticed—and maybe it’s a lot for Tommy to ask after everything he said about it before, but where the hell is Oliver?

Like the thought is some absurd cue an arrow flies through the air, knocking the gun out of one of their kidnapper’s hands. “Let them go!” The Hood’s distorted voice booms through the church, but immediately three of them start shooting up at the balcony while the unarmed man makes a grab for Thea. Though his hands are tied, Tommy manages to kick the gun lying on the ground a few feet before throwing himself in some absurd body check at the man. Thea lets out a scream as they both go down on the floor.

The kidnapper is quick to get his hands around Tommy’s neck. He hears Thea start to run toward them to his aid, but something stops her.

“Release him.” The Hood commands. He thinks the man tries to argue, but he’s gasping for air by this point. All he understands is that mere seconds later, there’s a yell above him and he’s let go. An arrow is stuck in the man’s shoulder. He falls to the side of Tommy, allowing him to just catch the grim look on the Hood’s face, bow still aimed.

“Go!”

Thea doesn’t need to be told twice, and she drags him up from the ground with her. Tommy lets her, overwhelmed as he is between immense relief and terror. He’s never seen the Hood—Oliver—truly in action before, not even that first time his friend saved the two of them from kidnappers. The pained cries of the men in that church is not something he’s likely to forget anytime soon.
It’s not until later when they’re sitting in the police station—the true sanctuary of the night—that he realizes what those cries really mean: life.

Officer Lance radios into the station and confirms what Tommy has only just barely grasped; all four of the men, the self-proclaimed Hoods, have been found chained up for the police to take into custody. Thea hardly seems to take notice, just continues to sit with him, clenching his hand between two of hers like it’s an anchor. But for Tommy, it’s like some invisible pressure, a tightness in his chest, has been eased. The terror is gone.

So when Thea suddenly jumps up from the chair with a shout of, “Ollie!” she’s not the only one smiling. Oliver, in street clothes, makes a beeline for his sister, pulling her into a hug.

“She, thank you God you’re ok,” he says, as if seeing her for the first time tonight. The act falls just slightly flat, however, when he can’t quite meet Tommy’s eyes. “Both of you.”

“Well we’re just glad to see you,” Tommy states, yet his old friend continues to keep his gaze mostly on the ground. “Actually, Thea, you mind if I borrow your brother for a minute? Won’t take long, promise.”

“Sure,” she readily agrees, not seeming to notice Oliver’s suddenly uncomfortable expression. Still, he follows Tommy into what looks like a breakroom, empty at this time of night.

Since the other man doesn’t offer anything to say, however, it’s up to him to find some way of starting the conversation. Like most awkward situations, Tommy finds himself reverting to humor.

“You know, you might want to be careful. People are going to start thinking I’m your damsel in distress or something.”

That at least provokes Oliver to look up at him, and he can see the man’s expression is at war between frustration and guilt. “Tommy, I wasn’t trying to come back here to be the Hood again. But when I heard about you and Thea, I couldn’t leave it to the police. And I know that’s wrong…and I’m sorry.”

“Why?” His friend looks like he can’t believe the question, and Tommy’s amazed he has to elaborate. “You saved our lives. Better yet, you saved those guys’ lives, too.” He doesn’t want to think how bloody a potential shootout with the police would’ve been—if the police had ever managed to find the Hoods.

Oliver blinks, then shakes his head. “Tommy…no. No, you of all people cannot be ok with this, not after—I killed your father, Tommy,” he reminds, voice harsh, “I’m a murderer.”

“And he would’ve killed you if you hadn’t, right? Because he was one too, remember?” He bites the words out, tone even more derisive as he adds, “All to ‘save the city’. But you know where the two of you were different, Oliver? You actually did.

“Have you even taken a look at the figures for how many people could have died if both bombs had gone off?” He continues, right over the start of a protest from his friend. Oliver’s mouth snaps shut and he can glean the answer from that. “If you hadn’t been looking into things, doing what you were doing, those people in the Glades wouldn’t have stood a chance against my father. Hell, there is a lot wrong with the way you did things, I’ve said that more than once, but at least you knew that. At least you’re willing to admit that that island messed you up…more than the rest of us were, anyway.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Oliver counters quietly. “I never wanted any of you to know.”

“Those people you keep down in that hideout of yours says differently,” he remarks. “And if you
were going to let anybody know, well, they’re pretty good people from what I can tell. They helped you when I threw up a wall, and Oliver, I guess what I’m trying to say is I’m tired of shutting people out just cause I feel like they’ve let me down. Maybe I’m ready to start seeing the hero your friends told me you are.”

He thinks for the first time in nearly six years, he’s truly stunned his friend. Oliver sounds almost raw admitting, “I don’t know if I am one, Tommy. I wasn’t going to be a vigilante again. I can’t even save my own company like I came back to do.”

“The lovely Ms. Rochev?” He guesses. “She’s pretty much got me cornered.” Tommy knows he’ll sell; he’s not a fighter, no matter how much Laurel urges him to be. Forestalling her disappointment has been his only motivation.

“I think Walter might be willing to invest, but even then I’ll only get five of the ten percent up for grabs.” It’s clear the other man is unloading and Tommy’s just glad his crash course in business the last few months is allowing him to keep up. “She’ll own half, I’ll own half. Not ideal.”

It takes a moment for the idea to really sink in, especially after his own experience with Oliver’s insulting absentee ownership of the Verdant months before, and in the end he can’t help asking, “You really want to be CEO?”

“I told Officer Lance tonight I’m trying a new way,” Oliver confides, choosing his words with even more care than usual. “That’s going to be about more than the Vigilante. I want my life—my whole life—to be something my family and my friends, the people I care about, can be proud of.”

It’s a bold statement, not to mention ambitious, but definitely a good many steps up from the hit list mission of last year. Before he can really comment aloud, however, there’s a knock before the door opens revealing Thea.

“Ok, I get you guys have catching up to do, but I’m going to Roy’s if this isn’t wrapping up soon.”

“That will not be necessary,” Oliver states firmly. He makes to leave, but pauses before Tommy and offers his hand. His grip is tight when Tommy shakes it and a real, genuine smile lights his face. “I’m glad we talked.”

“It was about time,” he replies honestly. Thea gives him a tight hug, but he can’t help teasing, “Spend some time with your brother, Speedy, you had five months with the boyfriend.” It earns him a smack on the arm, though she’s grinning when she pulls away.

Tommy follows a few paces behind the Queen siblings until the front hall where he’s met by his own company.

“Tommy!” Laurel envelops him perhaps even tighter than Thea just minutes before. “I was held up at the office—the DA—but God, when I heard—”

“Hey, I’m fine,” he reassures, hating how much she worries about him. The threats clogging the spam folder of his email are already bad enough. “The Hood took care of it.”

Her relieved smile takes on a pinched quality. “So he really is back.” It sounds less than enthusiastic.

“I would’ve thought you’d call that a good thing,” he can’t help remarking.

“Maybe the mayor would have,” she shoots right back. His girlfriend seems to take in his widened eyes for she gives a heavy sigh. “Even if he stopped the Hoods, it doesn’t change the fact they got their inspiration from him, Tommy. These last few months have more than proved we can’t rely on
self-appointed guardians.”

He’s almost tempted to look for hidden cameras. “Laurel, I’m not your boss. You can be honest with me.”

“I am being honest,” she tells him earnestly. “You’ve grown up a lot this year, and so have I. I’m ready to stop believing in heroes and do my job.”

Only too recently he would’ve been happy to hear it. Now the best he can offer is a nod paired with what feels more like a grimace than a smile. If she only knew—but this is hardly his secret to tell, and there’s a tiny part of Tommy that can’t help to still think if Laurel knew…He’s being at least a little selfish in his silence. That ugly part of him that makes him think you’re just like him. Malcolm.

“Thea’s ok too, right?” Laurel’s asking him, and he does his best to shake off those lingering doubts. “Oliver must’ve been so worried.”

“Yeah.” Worried enough to don the vigilante persona he’d apparently been trying to abandon. If things really do go badly for the man at Queen Consolidated, he might simply end up returning to it out of last resort. But a reluctant bent to something like this can hardly be much better in the long run than a murderous one. If Oliver’s really serious about bringing meaning to all aspects of his life, than he at least needs the options, the choice. Tommy’s already experiencing what it’s like to run out of those.

It’s then that the idea occurs to him, and he possibly startles Laurel when he reaches out and grabs her hands. “Laurel, I think I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” She echoes, looking just a little alarmed at the sudden shift in his mood.

“How to keep the company. Sort of,” he amends. “But I’ll need some help figuring out the legal stuff. I know you’re the ADA but could you maybe—?”

“Yes, Tommy, I’ll be your personal lawyer,” she agrees while rolling her eyes. “So, all-nighter at our place?”

Tempting as the words our place are, he shakes his head. “No. We’ve got to see somebody else last minute.”

It’s a good thing he knows from years of Thea’s complaints that Walter Steele has a habit of staying late at the office.

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Isabel Rochev marches into Starling National Bank and heads straight for the office of the CFO. She can privately admit to a little curiosity as to the reason for her summons here, but when she’s shown in those already there help to demystify the situation slightly. Still she exchanges pleasantries with Mr. Steele first before addressing her primary target.

“Mr. Queen, good morning. You do realize that requesting a meeting just before the stock exchange opens will not delay the inevitable? My presence is not required to purchase Queen Consolidated’s remaining shares.”

“I’m sure, Ms. Rochev,” he answers with a handshake and a tight smile. “And I was not the one who called this meeting.”

“That would be me,” it’s Mr. Merlyn who interjects. She’s actually a little surprised at this turn of
events. The younger Merlyn so far has shown almost none of the initiative or planning of his father. She’s unsure now what this is about.

“If you wished to discuss the sale of your company, Mr. Merlyn, it seems to me that is an affair that only concerns the two of us.”

“He isn’t selling.” It’s Laurel Lance who states, rising from a chair that’s placed between Queen and Merlyn’s. Rather indicative of the state of things between the three, according to her mentor.

“And even if he was, it’s not to Stellmoor,” the blonde aide, Smoak, from her first interrupted meeting with Robert’s son pipes up. Curious that she should be here; while Isabel is more than aware the secret vigilante is not the idiot she calls him, it is possible he still requires assistance in business deals.

“Perhaps I can explain,” Mr. Steele smoothly regains control of the proceedings. Once they’ve all gathered at a table, he begins, “I was approached last night by Mr. Merlyn about overseeing a merger, between Merlyn Global and Queen Consolidated. Because of your significant shares in both companies, it is of course important we get your input on the terms of the deal.”

She absorbs the new information silently for a few moments. “You have been resistant to selling your company to Stellmoor International and now you are offering it to Queen Consolidated. Why?”

“I think that this is a deal that can benefit all three of us.” Merlyn tells her. “Instead of losing both companies it’d be making a single, stronger one.”

“That’s certainly something that would give the investors more confidence, don’t you think?” Oliver Queen inquires of her. He looks smug, likely thinking he’s thrown her with this unexpected move. But it’s only the smallest of setbacks. It might even be an advantage; Queen, Merlyn, and Lance, all throwing their lot in together on one sinking ship. If she plays her cards right she’ll be able to tear their happy little truce apart in a matter of months.

In fact, the younger Merlyn and Queen sticking together even after the Undertaking is certainly something Alderman Blood will love to draw attention to.

For now, she places a polite smile on her face. “Very well. I’m sure there’s still much work to be done. I’ll need to see what’s been written up immediately.”

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The day after the Vigilante’s triumphant return, Barry finds himself first to the foundry, which is a first in and of itself. He should’ve figured everyone else would be held up at the company today and can only hope that means good news. They hadn’t had the time to catch up last night, after all, so Barry doesn’t know what idea Mrs. Queen had to keep the family business in the family.

He’s gotten no word from Oliver, Felicity, or Dig so that has to mean they’re busy, right? It’s habit and a bit of a guess that’s brought him here, and he’s going to feel pretty stupid if he’s read the situation wrong and they aren’t crime fighting again.

It’ll be no thanks to him if they are. When it counted, of course, Oliver did the right thing, like Barry always knew he was going to. He’s happy about that, because Starling needs the Vigilante to help pull it out of the tailspin it’s been in since the Undertaking, just as much as it needs Oliver Queen in a CEO position where he can hopefully affect even further positive change. The other man gives so much to this city it leaves him in awe.

But then there’s also a small part of Barry—the part that kept him from really pressing the issue of
Oliver bringing back his vigilante persona, the part that was admittedly content to let the other man go on willfully ignoring that part of his life for as long as he wanted—that can only feel a sort of slowly building dread all while he’s bracing for a fall. Because he recalls very clearly how Oliver feels about relationships and vigilantism: according to him, they can’t coexist.

It’s an ugly, selfish fear, one that occupied all his thoughts instead of the motivation he should have been feeling to get Oliver back in that hood. Personal dilemmas aside, he signed onto this team just like Felicity and Diggle because he believed in what they all could achieve together. That it took Thea and Tommy getting abducted for him to remember that fills him with shame.

Yes, Oliver more than deserves to have a life outside of vigilantism, and it’s a life Barry wants nothing more than to be a part of, but maybe the other man does have a point; at least on his side, he’s let his own feelings distract from the mission.

So when the door finally does open, it’s a sound he’s both dreading and anticipating. Three sets of feet on the stairs. Felicity is the first down and when she spots him her face splits into a smile. “Well look who’s actually early.”

“Hey, it had to happen once,” he defends, able to summon something of a grin and lighthearted tone. Immediately he tries to redirect things back onto his friends. “So, uh, what’s the plan for tonight?”

“I’m game for anything as long as it doesn’t involve skydiving,” Felicity offers to which he can’t help but smile a little.

“This city still needs saving, and we’re not the only ones who think so,” Oliver observes, serious like most times in the face of any sort of humor in the Cave. Barry does his best to turn his expression neutral and simply listen. “So this can’t be about just crossing some names off a list. It needs something more.”

“It needs a hero, Oliver,” Dig sums up what the other man is trying to say completely.

“It’s too bad the Hoods kind of ruined your nickname,” Felicity remarks.

But Oliver doesn’t seem very bothered. “No, it’s good. I don’t want to be called the Hood anymore.”

“Ok,” says Dig. “So what do you want to be called?”

In Barry’s peripheral vision, Oliver is holding one of his arrows up to the light, studying it intently. “I have some ideas,” the older man tells Diggle. He goes to put back the arrow while Felicity is making a beeline for her computers. Barry makes to follow her, as it’s the only option that doesn’t involve the truthfully unavoidable conversation he’ll be having with Oliver about calling things off. There’s no way it won’t happen.

In fact, sure enough, before he can reach the blonde woman, a hand, familiar in its firm grip and the warmth it seems to send spreading though his whole body, lands on his shoulder. Oliver’s apparently grown tired of Barry ignoring him, which he should have expected.

“I need to talk to you about something. Can’t wait,” he murmurs practically in Barry’s ear, and he tries to ignore the shiver that sends down his spine in favor of appreciating that Oliver is at least going to be discrete about this. As he follows the other man to the far side of the revamped Cave behind some shelving holding equipment, Dig even moves over to Felicity’s station and strikes up a conversation, probably to give them even more privacy. It’ll hopefully help make this as painless and least awkward as possible.

Yet once he’s facing the older man, Barry finds himself speaking first. “Look, Oliver, I know what
you’re going to say.” Maybe not having him physically say the words will make this somehow easier to bear. “And I- I get it. Really. I guess I even agree with it. But even if we don’t, um,” his voice wavers, and oh God, he can’t even say it. “I still want to be here, though. I mean I hope that’s ok. Because it’s all still really important to me.” He’s blinking furiously to ward off any hint of tears and feels it’s only fair to offer a, “Sorry,” if he’s going to make this so difficult.

When he finally manages to look back up at Oliver, the man’s expression is unreadable. At least until he states wryly, “That’s a lot more complicated than I was expecting for ‘Do you like Italian?’”

“Huh?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” the other man clarifies. “The restaurant where I want to take you to dinner is Italian. Is that ok?” He looks more amused than anything that he’s having to spell it out, but Barry can feel nothing but astonishment.

“We’re still on?” He blurs.

“Yes,” Oliver answers. Then his look turns slightly more piercing as he regards the mess Barry likely is standing before him. “Why did you think we weren’t?”

It takes him a few moments to find his voice. “I—you’re being the Vigilante again. I thought that’d mean you wouldn’t want—”

“Don’t say entanglements,” Oliver cuts across. When Barry can only sheepishly maintain silence, the older man sighs, eyes closing briefly. “I’m an idiot.”

“No, but you were right,” it has to be the guilt he’s carrying that’s making Barry insist this. “Because of how I feel about you I didn’t try hard enough to get you to be the Vigilante again.”

“You let me make the decision on my own. Just like you said you would,” Oliver counters calmly.

“That makes it sound a lot less selfish than it was,” he argues, crossing his arms. “I thought it wouldn’t matter or I wouldn’t let it matter, but then I guess I did. And I- I got scared.”

“Scared I’d call things off,” the older man states bluntly.

“Yes?” He can’t seem to drag his eyes up from the floor. “It was just a stupid assumption, and I shouldn’t have because I trust you—”

“Why should you?” Oliver asks, which of course gifts Barry the motivation to lift his head ready to inquire if the other man’s gone crazy, but he adds, “And I mean about this, Barry, because I have given you no reason to. Not yet.” His gaze turns soft, just a bit wistful. “It’s something I knew I’d have to work for.”

He just manages to stop himself rolling his eyes, though at the same time he can feel the blush rising in his cheeks. “You don’t have to.” A little crisis of insecurity on his part is not going to contribute to Oliver’s self-inflicting martyrdom if he can help it.

But typically stubborn, the other man simply replies, “Then I want to.”

“By what, being a good date? Cause I was kind of hoping for that already,” Barry points out.

Oliver looks about to continue the dispute with increasing frustration, but draws a breath in and out instead. “Just let me do this. Please, Barry.”
“Alright,” he gives in, and doesn’t bother to stop the eye roll this time, even if he’s begrudgingly smiling. It turns fonder as he adds, “Italian’s a good start, though.” He rocks forward onto his toes as he can’t resist leaning in to give the older man a quick peck on the mouth, more than a little overcome with relief and just a bit of excitement. Then they can rejoin the others.

Or at least that’s the plan, but as soon as their lips meet Oliver winds an arm around his waist to drag him in closer and deepen the kiss. Barry’s happy enough to go along with it, taking a tight hold of his shoulders. There’s a free hand walking up and down his spine until it briefly—intentional or not he’s unsure—slips under the hems of both the sweater and shirt he’s wearing to rub the callused pads of fingers over his bare skin. Barry can’t stop a gasp leaving his lips at the sensation and the heat it sends shooting down the same path Oliver took along his spine to coil somewhere below his stomach.

Instead of taking advantage of his now parted lips, Oliver pulls off slightly to pant, “Does 7:30, Friday work?”

“Uh,” Barry has to scramble together some semblance of an organized mind in order to check and answer, “Yeah.”

Oliver’s grinning broadly at him and places a last open-mouth kiss on him that he’s glad they’re hidden behind a number of shelves for. “Great.” With a last enticing brush of those fingers he has to work extremely hard to suppress a shudder from, the other man is walking back out to the main space. A few moments later he can hear the question, “Felicity, what have you got?”

Figures he’d want the last, well, word.

Barry’s just trying to focus on not letting his legs fall out from under him. He’s got a hand braced on the wall and can feel his heartrate slowing back down, though the thump-thump of it still sounds in his ears. The last thing he was expecting from today was finalizing their date plans and something of a make out in the Cave—actually, that was the last thing he’d ever have expected to happen—but maybe this really can be easy like he told Oliver.

The man seems to be reveling in it. Whether he’s trying to make things up to Barry or not, this, them, makes Oliver happy. Not to mention more than a little daring…he tugs his shirt and sweater back down, struggling to take his mind off that touch. God, he’s been single way too long till now.

After a few more moments needed to collect himself, he makes his way back over to the others. Oliver’s out of the room, seemingly changing or already gone in his vigilante gear, and Diggle is setting up the com links.

Before he puts his in, he takes a seat on Felicity’s left and asks, “So things at the company worked out?”

“Yep, even better than we were hoping for. Mostly thanks to Tommy, which is something of a change, let me tell you. Oliver’s really happy about it,” she informs him, then looks over with a somewhat quizzical expression. “Didn’t he say?”

“No,” Barry replies, and fights the smile wanting to spread across his face. “But…I could kind of tell. We’re, um, going out on Friday.”

Her eyes go wide behind her glasses. “Oh!”

“Yeah.” The smile wins. And first he, then Felicity, dissolve into laughter.

“Alright you two,” Dig chides, though there’s a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as
well. “Let’s get to work.”

Barry takes a steadying breath, puts his com in, and does just that. It finally feels like they’re leaving those long months after the Undertaking behind.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, we are moving forward into the start of season two - though next chapter will be primarily focused on the date! I already have a number of pages of it typed up so I promise to have it up much, much sooner. Thanks once again for your patience and continued support and I would love to here any feedback!
Ok, finally got the update for you guys! And just in time to celebrate bisexuality awareness week - Barry and Oliver going on their first date!

Also, just want to give everyone a huge thank you once again for your patience and your amazing support. It feels really great, and I'm just happy to be able to give you guys this story in return. I did end up getting a tumblr, so if you want to just check that out or say hi, feel free. Hope you enjoy the chapter!

Come Friday, Barry is not feeling great at all, naturally. Not the physically ill kind of not-feeling-great, unless he counts the jumping nerves and the distinct feeling his stomach’s about to drop all the way down to the lobby of his building without him. But it’s nothing that will stop him from going out tonight, which is the plan, so.

He’s rushing from his closet to the mirror he has hung up on the inside of his bedroom door, holding up various shirt and jacket combinations. He’s already settled on a pair of black slacks, because although Oliver had said he could dress as casual as he wanted, Barry’s banking on the older man’s background and current billionaire lifestyle to mean he should take that with a healthy 0.45 kilograms of salt. And anyway, it’s their first date—he’s looking to impress.

He’s not looking to have a panic attack as the minutes tick down to when Oliver said he’d pick Barry up, but it looks like that might end up happening. He practically jumps a foot in the air at the sound of his phone—oh God, is he early?—but then nearly cries in relief at the sight of his caller I.D.: Iris.

“Oh thank you so much, you’re a lifesaver, you don’t even know how much I needed you to call me right now,” he answers it all in a rush.

Much to her credit, Iris barely waits a beat before replying with, “Well, all I was trying to do was catch up, but ok, what metaphorical ledge am I talking you down from this time?”

“You’re going to hate me,” he feels it only fair to warn, “But I’ve got a date tonight—”

“Really?”

“—with Oliver,” he finishes, and waits for the inevitable explosion.

“What? I thought he moved!”

“Well he moved back, um, recently,” he leaves it vague, not really wanting to build up even more connections between the Oliver Iris has somehow made up in her head and his Oliver. His meaning the one he knows and is real, not that Oliver is his because that would just be presumptuous. “We talked it out.”

“Uh-huh,” she doesn’t sound quite convinced, but before he can even begin to protest on Oliver’s behalf, she simply requests, “Please tell me this guy actually deserves a second chance and you’re not just being a pushover.”
“I’m not and he does,” he answers firmly. “So if that’s settled…first date? Help?”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, Gray suit with the red tie.” It’s probably a sad statement that Iris can still know exactly what’s in his closet. “Red’s good on you.”

“Really?” Not so long ago, such a little compliment might have left him in high spirits for the rest of the night. Now his good mood is mostly made up of gratitude for Iris’ superior mastery of the fashion color wheel.

“Yes, Bear.” He can practically hear the eye roll. “So, where’s the dinner? What time are you meeting him?”

“I don’t know yet,” he admits, pulling out the recommended attire. “He’s picking me up.”

“Ooh!” Iris teases, and he can’t help making a face. It’s both been somewhat relaxing and yet even more nerve-inducing to have such a passive role in organizing this date. On the one hand, he’s been told more than once that he’s something of an over-planner, but on the other…he kind of likes knowing the plan.

As for being picked up, that had just as much to do with Barry’s lack of a car as it did with Oliver coming straight from work, but telling his oldest friend that is almost inviting her to ask where Oliver works. This whole conversation has been a series of omissions and half-truths, and if he hadn’t wanted to pile the guilt on before dinner he should be talking to Felicity. But calling his date’s secretary—and oh, had the blonde woman had an earful to say about that when they’d met for lunch earlier in the week—to panic about said date seems foolish. So he ought to just be glad Iris called and—ugh, he’s tying himself up in knots.

He thinks some very vital internal organ does twist unpleasantly when his phone buzzes with a text from Oliver. “And dinner’s now.”

“What?”

“He’s outside!” Barry practically flings the phone onto the bed in a rush to finish changing.

He can still hear Iris’ laughter pouring from the speaker. “Late again? I’ll just let you get ready, then. But you’re telling me all about it later!”

“Yeah, ok,” he agrees while fumbling with his tie.

“Have fun!” Is her parting instruction, but by the time he’s ready and running down the steps he’s mostly trying to construct the right-sounding apology. It’s just like him to hold everything up, isn’t it? He should feel lucky they’re not meeting up at the restaurant or it’d probably look like he’d stood Oliver up.

He’s sure he looks a nervous mess as he rounds the corner into the alley they’d chosen as the pickup point. “Sorry I’m late,” he offers automatically to Oliver who for once is waiting outside the car. Waiting and looking, well…wow. There’s a casual ease to the way he’s leaning on the hood of the car, and Barry wishes there was something he could support himself with because he thinks he’s going weak in the knees all over again.

What is wrong with him? He’s seen Oliver in suits before, probably this exact one, and yet it’s as if
knowing it was chosen with this—with him—in mind somehow makes it different.

He tries to get a hold back on his thoughts as Oliver states, “It’s fine. Just got here. But we do have a reservation to keep.”

Barry’s momentarily thrown when the other man heads for the passenger door, and hastens to say, “You really don’t have to—” But he’s already holding the door open, and looks both amused and expectant. Barry suppresses a sigh, and the memory of Iris’ all too recent teasing, and offers a quiet, “Thanks,” as he ducks inside.

The excitement for this evening quickly reasserts itself, however, for as soon as Oliver’s behind the wheel he starts in with, “You going to tell me where we’re going yet? Or do I guess? Cause I did some research—”

“Of course you did,” the older man mutters with a shake of his head, but it sounds fond.

“Hey, I investigate for a living. Anyway, I figure there’s got to be about five Italian places in the city that’re as good as you say this one is.”

He catches Oliver’s smile by the glint of his teeth off a street lamp. A light chuckle follows. “It’s not going to be any one of those.” One of his hands is taken off the wheel to squeeze Barry’s knee. “Just wait, ok?”

It’s not that much longer of a drive, though he’s surprised and a little disappointed with himself to find that Oliver’s right. It must show in his expression, for the other man explains, “This place gets business in part because it stays off the radar. Less celebrities and paparazzi coverage, but still just as good.” Rather than head for a parking lot, Oliver stops them right in front and hands off the keys to a valet as if to demonstrate.

Inside, neither of them even have the chance to speak to the host, who takes up two menus as soon as he sees them. “Mr. Queen and guest, right this way.” It’s not empty but certainly quiet, perhaps due to the thick carpet swallowing up their footsteps, and the various couples or groups, most at middling or older age, talk amongst themselves in mild tones, though some watch as they pass by. It’s the sort of atmosphere that would befit a family dinner rather than a night on the town with Tommy, and he wonders if that’s how Oliver learned of it.

He’s tempted to ask, but once they sit down the first thing Oliver does is order them each a glass of the featured wine and what slips out is, “Do I even want to know how expensive?” He’s eyeing his menu now more in morbid curiosity than anything, but of course upon opening it he discovers it has no prices.

Oliver laughs. “You can treat me to a beer sometime. That’s more your thing, isn’t it?”

He allows a smile, not answering as the waiter returns briefly with their drinks. Barry watches the dark liquid pouring into each glass, and reaches for the bottle that’s left behind to examine the label. “I guess you could say that. But I’ve always wanted to try wine. Red was my mom’s favorite, actually, she used to have a glass before bed every night—”

It hits him spectacularly late how bad a choice this is for an opening conversation and he looks up from the bottle with wide eyes and a reddening face. “And that was the last thing you wanted to hear tonight, probably. Sorry.”

“Why?” Oliver looks perplexed by the apology, and then his brow furrows. “Barry, you know you can talk to me about anything.”
“I, um, yeah,” is what he says because he’s always sort of felt that to be true, but to hear it stated so bluntly is kind of powerful. “I just didn’t want to get into all of that tonight.”

The other man seems to consider it, though is still watching him closely. “If that’s what you want.”

Barry doesn’t reply, just sips at the wine to avoid saying anything else stupid. The menu is a helpful way to distract and take up some time, though he’s simultaneously trying to determine which item will be least expensive.

As if he can read his mind, Oliver says, “Get what you want, Barry.” He maybe jumps a little in his chair. “I can more than cover it.”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t. If we did this again.” He’s not sure why he’s picking his words so carefully, though it might have to do with the occasional subtle-but-not-really looks various patrons of the restaurant are giving him, the unfamiliar interloper; how if any of the other table’s occupants strained their ears enough they could probably listen in, and Barry’s pretty sure that the term ‘guest’ still means he’s here as Oliver Queen’s friend or business associate or something else decidedly platonic. It’s making him nervous and over-analytical of everything he’s saying or doing.

To make up for that, he gives in and orders something he thinks he’ll like regardless of price. Then finds himself, with some distant sense of alarm, already draining his first glass of wine.

“I didn’t think I was going to be so bad at this,” he confesses to the tablecloth.

“Are you usually?” At least Oliver’s not pretending to make him feel better. Still, he winces and reaches again for the bottle.

“Don’t know, exactly. I kept busy in college, you know?”

Right, four-time dropout. “Oh, well, I did fellowships and research papers, that sort of thing. My advisor thought I should’ve kept going with grad school, but I already knew I wanted to be a forensic scientist, so there wasn’t really a need to.”

“If you’d gone to grad school, which I’ll be the first to say I’m glad wasn’t the case,” the other man starts after a moment, which makes Barry grin at for the sentiment if nothing else, “what would you have studied? Chemistry?”

“I’m not sure,” he replies, “I mean it was such a non-issue. But definitely something in the sciences. There’s just so much, though. This one summer, I went to reptile camp—”

“Reptile camp?” Is echoed back at him, amusement plainly evident.

“I was twelve, ok, and it was really cool,” he insists. “You got to learn about all these different kinds, like the phrynocephalus, which communicates with its kind just by curling and uncurling its tail, and scares predators away by doing a series of weird, colorful mouth-flaps. We made masks during arts and crafts—and you should really just stop me anytime.”

Like his usual fact-rambles, it all sort of tumbles out very quickly with Barry almost powerless to stop it, and he can only watch as Oliver’s eyebrows rise almost to his hairline. But with the last statement, the other man can’t seem to contain a single bark of a laugh. “Wow. You sure you shouldn’t be a herpetologist or something?”

“Herpetologist,” he corrects with a chuckle, nudging at Oliver’s foot with his own, about all the
retaliation he has available. A challenging gleam lights the other’s eyes, but before he can take any action their food arrives. And though there’s not much conversation as they each start on their own meals, Barry finally feels settled enough to venture, “What did you do over your summers? I mean before, obviously.”

“Nothing all that interesting,” the other man dismisses.

Right, Oliver doesn’t really talk about before. “That’s ok if it’s not,” he tries. His date just gives a short nod. Not wanting to pressure him, he switches topics. “So, how are things going with the merger?”

“Well, they’re going,” Oliver says after some thought, placing his fork down. “We have had to let some people go, but it’s a lot less than it would’ve been and with much better packages than Stellmoor would’ve offered. Tommy’s mostly operating out of the old Merlyn Global building for now, which keeps Isabel busy going between at least.” It’s with a certain satisfaction that he says the last part, which is just as much a testament to what this Isabel Rochev is like as everything Felicity’s had to say about her.

“And it’s just staying Queen Consolidated, right?” A nod in reply. “Was Tommy cool with that?”

“It’s about the only thing he and Isabel agreed on,” Oliver confides. “Said it’d be bad for business to keep Merlyn’s name up there.”

He can tell the billionaire feels badly about it for his friend’s sake, so he acknowledges, “It’s hard for people to forget a name. Even though he had nothing to do with it. I mean, when I was a kid my dad wanted me to change mine—God, I’m sorry.” He’s already grimacing, but Oliver’s momentary look of shock somehow makes it worse.

“No, Barry,” he’s quick to recover, leaning just a little closer over the table and adding, “You don’t have to apologize for talking about your family.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, though he can’t seem to hold the other’s gaze and instead focuses on pushing the remains of his dinner around the plate with his fork. “I guess… I’m still not used to people believing me. Usually when they want to talk about my mom’s case or my dad it’s to tell me I’m wrong. So, really, thanks.”

He feels Oliver’s foot slide to rest side by side against his own, about the only physical comfort he can expect to receive in this restaurant. And yet Barry still finds himself fretting over whether the tablecloth is long enough to cover that.

His retreat back into fidgeting and nerves hasn’t been missed by Oliver, who calls the waiter back over for the check, which he won’t even let Barry see. “Let’s get out of here.”

He can’t help the relief at that suggestion and is already breathing easier as they wait for the valet to pull the car around. But that doesn’t stop him from noticing Oliver’s somewhat troubled expression as they pull away from the restaurant.

He’ll blame the wine if this doesn’t go over well, but as they get closer to his apartment he asks, “Do you want to come up? Just for a bit, I mean, if you want.”

“Sure,” the other man decides after a moment. “Night’s still young.” By both their standards, they’d normally be staying up with Felicity and Diggle far later than this. He feels an extra pang of guilt knowing they’ve set aside this time when they would’ve otherwise been working to help people.

Due to the perpetually broken elevator, he leads his guest up the several flights to his apartment
before letting him in. Oliver starts looking around in interest, but he doesn’t give him much time to. As soon as he’s got the door shut Barry goes right up to him, takes his face in both hands, and kisses him full on the lips. Oliver’s not expecting it, which he can’t blame him for after everything he’s put him through tonight.

“I was a bad date, and I’m really sorry about that.” The other man rolls his eyes, so he persists, “I’m serious. I don’t know what got into me.” It’s not as if he’s never been out to eat with Oliver before—just not as a date.

“Nerves?” Is Oliver’s rather sound guess. A grin tugs at the corner of his mouth as he takes a seat on the living room’s lumpy couch. “Happens to everyone, Barry.”

“Just not you,” he replies dryly. The grin turns smug as the man rests his hands behind his head and gazes openly up at him. Now alone, Barry can fully appreciate the thrill at such blatant attention, but in equal measure some consternation at his inability to emulate the confidence with which Oliver has handled the evening. His skin heats up with a minor flush, and he tugs the knot of his tie loose. “I guess I’m just not a fancy restaurants sort of guy,” he finally gives in with a sigh.

“Did you really not like it?”

“Well, no. I wanted to go out with you, and I still like the idea of dating. It just…” he pushes a hand back through his hair, struggling to find the right words. “It felt like anybody could hear us or see us, and we’ve haven’t really talked about what, uh, we want people to know,” he explains, not quite able to look at the other man. He’s ashamed to feel worried at the idea of people knowing. Not as much for him as for Oliver, and he says as much. “I don’t want to complicate things. I mean, you just got the company back and everybody in the media’s still talking about you.” He only realizes he’s been pacing when Oliver reaches out and snags one of his arms, tugging him to a stop.

“I can handle some negative press.” With another tug, Barry falls easily onto the couch, just avoiding landing in Oliver’s lap. “But how about we stick to just one-on-one for now?”

At last, Barry feels himself fully relax, and gives a grateful nod. “Dinner’s overrated,” he remarks, which makes Oliver smile brief but warm before leaning in to reclaim his lips.

So maybe he hasn’t totally messed things up tonight.

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Oliver wasn’t being entirely truthful last night about the nerves. Because he does get them—just not until the next day.

It’s an unfortunately slow morning at Queen Consolidated. Technically he doesn’t even have to be here, but putting in a few hours on a weekend will hopefully help him to keep up later, considering he doesn’t really have the option of staying late most nights. And he really does need something else to focus on.

By no means would he call last night a disaster. But as closely as he was watching Barry it had been impossible to ignore the tense line to his shoulders in the restaurant, the way his eyes almost unconsciously kept flitting past Oliver to catch sight of the other patrons. So while he wasn’t directly the cause of such discomfort, the fact it happened at all shows him he’d rather badly misjudged.

And even though things had seemingly taken a turn for the better once he’d returned them to Barry’s apartment, for Oliver the new surroundings had their own share of disquieting moments for him. Barry’s always been something of an organized mess, and his apartment is only an extension of that.
Keen eyes had caught on books haphazardly stored in shelves or stacked on the coffee table; by the television a multitude of DVDs the covers of which he didn’t recognize, and CDs with the faces of artists he couldn’t name; a trip to the bathroom before he left had also allowed him a quick look in the other man’s room where he’d seen framed high school and college diplomas, pictures of him with the Wests, and even more academically titled books and posters.

It’s not like these are things he couldn’t have guessed about Barry before. But it really makes him wonder just how well he knows the younger man outside of their shared goal of improving the city. The attraction is plainly there between them—and the one undeniable highlight of last night had to be Barry in that suit, an unfortunately rare gift—a fondness and concern for the other. But Barry is a genius and Oliver, though he prides himself on a skill and mind that’s kept him alive all these years, flunked straight out of four colleges with little regret in a sometimes seemingly past life. How much can he really satisfy Barry on an intellectual level?

His office door swinging open and Felicity’s heels snap him out of his pessimistically trending thoughts. She’s brought coffee for herself and has a tablet tucked under her arm as per usual, though she’s a bit more tentative in her approach than most mornings.

“Well, I was expecting to find you lost in your thoughts today, but I kind of thought that there’d be a corresponding…happier…expression. Last night was good, right? I mean, you guys enjoyed yourselves—uh, not like that though, I’m not asking for those details.” Her cheeks are turning pink and it only worsens when he chooses to respond with a single raised eyebrow. “Right, not my business.” Her nose is soon buried in her tablet, fingers tapping away, though she looks up briefly. “I am your friend, though, Oliver. So if you really do need to talk about it…I know there’s really just me and John, but we are here for you.”

His eyes remain resolutely on his screen.

Felicity sighs and moves on. “But, um, anyway I think if we just go over the minutes of last week’s budget meeting and write up a first draft proposal to send to Tommy, we can—”

“Did Barry talk to you?” Damnit.

“What?” Her eyes are wide behind her glasses, and then she’s hurrying to set both tablet and coffee aside. “No. No, I wasn’t trying to make it sound like he had, you just looked kind of troubled. So I thought maybe something was bothering you. Everything is ok, though, right?”

He heaves a sigh of his own and minimizes whatever browser he’d been failing to pay attention to in the first place. “Things were fine. There were just these moments,” he struggles to find the right wording until settling on, “he’d look past me and, I don’t know, tense up. Close in on himself.”

She considers that for a moment, but doesn’t seem anywhere near the level of distressed he is by it. “That sounds less like he was uncomfortable with you and more with the other people in the restaurant.”

He tries not to sound impatient when he replies, “I got that much. I just don’t understand why it was such a problem.” They hadn’t been doing anything suspicious or out of the ordinary; his reputation as a former playboy would have guaranteed the perception that Oliver Queen was having dinner with a friend. And without a large crowd or flashing cameras, he would’ve thought that’d work best for Barry.

All Felicity can offer is, “It could just be that it didn’t really hit him till you guys were at the restaurant what it’d be like to be out with you but…not.”
He’s fairly certain the blank look he’s giving her conveys he doesn’t get that at all.

Felicity sighs. “Oliver, you compartmentalize, put on masks. Dig’s words, take it up with him. You’re really great at roleplaying—and I so did not just say that.” Her eyes squeeze shut for a moment and he has to suppress his own sigh, equal parts amused and exasperated.

But Oliver thinks he can guess where she was going, the worries his date had expressed last night over him and the company helping the realization along. “Barry doesn’t put on masks.” Sure, the younger man is a CSI by day and a vigilante team member by night, but he’s always emphasized how those two roles coexist in his mind. “So when he felt like he had to pretend, he was too focused on that to relax.” He’d even seen it happen, Barry smiling warm and open at him one minute, only to catch himself and school his features into something more restrained in the next like he’d done something wrong.

“Exactly,” Felicity is saying with a smile. “So it really had nothing to do with you.”

“But I should’ve realized,” he can’t help protesting. “I don’t know him well enough…I still know almost nothing about his mother’s murder.”

“Well you’re not exactly an open book about your past, Oliver,” It’s Diggle who makes the observation, having just entered the room with a coffee of his own. And if anyone could force him to face his hypocrisy with just one succinct statement, it’s this man. He knows he doesn’t talk about his past, not even all that much to Barry. But as far as he’s concerned, nothing about himself—both before and during his years away—is worth talking about.

He scowls, but rather than let him respond, Felicity intercedes with, “Maybe those are both things that need some time. Just, for now, start with the smaller stuff.”

Oliver knows she means to be encouraging, but all it does is get right at the crux of why he’s uncomfortable sharing those parts of himself with the younger man, serving as another reminder of all those books and movies and memorabilia that are clear indicators he is the outlier, the thing that doesn’t belong in Barry’s life. He keeps his tone steady as he remarks, “I don’t think we have a lot of similar interests.”

He’s worried she’ll see right through that to the insecurity underneath and favor him with some gentle, pitying look. Instead, Felicity turns aggravated, throwing her hands up in the air. “Geeky people do not have to just date geeky people!” He shares an alarmed look with Dig, both of them thrown by the outburst. Felicity isn’t done. “And really Oliver? Nearly a year’s worth of being teammates on a vigilante crusade says otherwise about your interests.”

“But aside from the mission,” he counters, realizing belatedly he’s risen from the chair to match her suddenly argumentative tone. “I barely understand what he’s talking about sometimes, Felicity. How- how can want that? Hell, I didn’t even know what a herpetologist was!”

“Well you’d have to enlighten me at the least because I sure don’t.” Dig comments with humor and Oliver turns sharply, hand raised and mouth open though he hasn’t fully thought out a retort yet.

“Oliver, you are missing the point,” Felicity states, urging him to focus back on her. “Barry is not dating you because you’re a smart person—not that you aren’t smart, because you are, but—” She takes a moment to collect herself again. “Barry’s not looking for a smart-geeky person. He already is one. Let him be the smart one

“Iris isn’t geeky-smart either, in case you didn’t know—hear me out!” She hastens to add, and he figures he must have pulled a face again at the mention of the woman. Which he is probably going to
have to learn to control around Barry. “I spent a week with both of them, remember? Iris finds geeky stuff boring, she makes fun of him when he goes on tangents, and they’re somehow still best friends.”

Diggle is the one who addresses the almost confounded tone the blonde had ended on. “You know, neither of you are all that good at pretending you’re not bothered by this girl.”

“Who, me? No,” Felicity defends, perhaps a little too quickly, yet she’s nothing but sincere when she continues, “We got along great while she was visiting. Actually, she asked me to update her on how the date went when she found out about it last night.” Somehow, he’s unsurprised the two have each other’s number. Her tone turns wry as she faces back towards Oliver. “So now I get to tell her you guys talked about reptiles and amphibians, apparently.”

“Is that the herpetologist thing?” Dig checks.

“A person that studies them, yeah,” Oliver answers, resigned. For whatever reason, it causes Felicity to look smug. “What?”

“Maybe you don’t understand everything he says at first, but you’re a pretty quick learner.”

“It means you were listening, Oliver. Think that’s all he’s really asking for,” John agrees, and he’s affording him a smile, like he’s proud of him. He wants to tell them they shouldn’t be proud, because how can just that possibly be enough—and yet he can’t help remembering the way Barry had kept cutting himself off, apologizing for going on about something he thought Oliver didn’t want to hear like it was some burden. He’s thought the man self-conscious before—at several points last night alone—but he thinks only now is he starting to realize the even deeper issue of Barry’s self-worth.

“So, since you basically asked whether or not you’re Barry’s ‘type’, Felicity is summing up in the present, “I’d say you are. But you should probably check that with your actual boyfriend.”

Dig snorts in amusement while Oliver grimaces, and the moment is broken.

“Thank you both,” and he hopes however dry he makes his tone they realize he sincerely means it. Oliver glances back to his computer, then decides, “I need coffee.”

“And that way’s the door,” Felicity recommends, stepping aside. For once, he doesn’t mind his supposed secretary’s rebellion, because a little time out of the office to process all of this is just what he wants.

He should have realized he was letting his worries get the better of him. He should be able to recognize the pitfalls in entering a new relationship blindfolded by now. And yet, there’s quite a lot about this relationship with Barry that’s different. Most importantly, it’s one he wants to last.

Maybe for that reason, he finds himself dialing a familiar number as he heads down in the elevator. “Hello?” Barry says around a yawn on the third ring. He sounds tired, like he slept through his alarm several times and had to rush to work without food or caffeine. Which isn’t surprising, considering how late Oliver had ended up staying last night, but he’d been hard-pressed to leave when the younger man had been so set on making up for his uneasy behavior at dinner.

He does his best to banish thoughts of lips soft and plump and tentative in their exploration up and down his neck while a hand clenches his tie like a lifeline, instead saying, “Hey, it’s me. This a bad time?”

“Oh, hey! No, I’m just waiting for some test results. Why?”
“We have a problem.”

“We do?” Barry now sounds more alert, and wary, and Oliver mentally berates himself for his word choice.

So he affects a more light-hearted tone as he tells the other man. “Yeah, see Felicity called you my boyfriend today. I’m almost thirty, Barry.”

“Well, if you want to round up, I won’t stop you,” the scientist sounds far more relaxed now, even teasing. He grumbles something incoherent under his breath which gets the other laughing for a minute. “Ok seriously though, is it a you don’t like the word thing or was Felicity just trying to get to you? She only does that cause you make it fun, you know.”

Well that’s something to file away for later, but he does his best to describe instead his issue with the ‘boyfriend’ label. “It just sounds…trivial.”

“Well, we have only been on one date,” Barry points out, “so maybe we can just think for a while about what we want to call this. I mean, I’m not in a hurry.”

“That works,” he agrees. Hesitates for a moment before getting to what he meant to call about. “Barry, at the restaurant—”

“Oliver, I’m really sorry about that,” Barry’s already rushing to say. “I know I was—it was really bad, and—”

“It’s ok,” he manages to get in, and knows Barry heard it when he falls silent. “Being there made you uncomfortable and I get why. Nobody has to be sorry.”

The man’s relief is palpable over the line when he asks, “I did say thank you for being so great about this right?” Oliver just chuckles. “I’d still want to- I mean, we can go out places, we totally should, just maybe not so…conspicuous?”

“How about Big Belly Burger sometime?” He suggests. “Haven’t been there since I got back. And it’d be good to catch up with Carly.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

He stops just outside the café around the corner from his building, because he can clearly recognize that tone; it’s the one Barry uses when he really doesn’t want to tell him something. “What?”

“Nothing, that sounds, uh, good. Just maybe don’t bring Dig?”

“Did something happen between them?”

“Not anymore.”

Oliver squeezes his eyes shut a moment. Not ten minutes ago the former soldier had been helping to talk him through his own romantic troubles and Oliver hadn’t even stopped to consider his. “I’m such an ass.”

“Well, I’m not much better. Felicity had to tell me,” Barry offers in some sort of glum solidarity. Then he thinks he hears some beeping tones in the background. “That’s my results, can you hold for a minute?”

“I’ll call back in five,” he proposes instead. He’s fortunately not met with much of a line inside and is
in and out with his coffee in less than that, but he doubts the other man will notice, much less mind. “Anything interesting?” He asks in lieu of a greeting.

“Most of it’s just processing casework,” Barry tells him, “But there is one thing that might be of use for, you know, what you’re planning to do later.”

“Oh?”

“The Hoods might be gone, but there’s still plenty of people taking matters into their own hands in the Glades. Usually with deadly force. I was thinking it might be a good idea for us to start identifying who those people were.”

He had been struggling, without the constancy of something like his father’s old list, to decide on a specific goal for their renewed mission. This goal could definitely be a start. Once more, he’s impressed by Barry’s skill. “So you have someone.”

“Not exactly,” the younger man admits. “But that’s where it gets interesting. See, there’ve been a lot male-on-female crimes being stopped lately, where the original assailant’s been killed but so far there’s no suspects. I was able to pull a couple similar strands of hair from a few of the crime scenes and match them—but not to a person.

“They’re **synthetic**. Mostly made out of nylon. There’s a woman running around the Glades in a wig stopping attempted muggings and rapes, how awesome is that? Ok, I know it’s definitely not awesome she’s been killing the guys,” Barry hastens to correct before he can even say anything, “but using a wig as a disguise is actually kind of genius. See, it helps to further confuse eyewitness memory. Hair color and length or style is way easier to remember than specific facial features, especially on a woman. It leaves more of an impression. So she’s basically tricking any potential witnesses into thinking she has a completely different appearance. They could probably pass her on the street and never know, forget a police lineup and—**oh my God**.”

It’s so abrupt he’s almost afraid Barry’s been caught at work telling him police information over the phone. That is, until he hears a muffled, “Seriously, please tell me when I’m going all geek on you. You don’t have to just listen to it.” He sounds mortified, like he’s hiding his face in his hands.

“Yes I do,” he reaffirms. “Whether it’s about work or summer camp, Barry, I’m going to listen.”

“Oh.” Now the scientist just sounds small and stunned and uncertain, like he doesn’t quite know what to do or say in the face of that. But he gathers a breath and says, “Thank you, really. And that goes both ways, you know that, right? I mean, I said before I wasn’t just there to listen to your problems, but…I do want to listen. To your problems, your whatever.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Oliver agrees, and it’s a struggle to fight against years of training not to just leave it at that. But he thinks of Dig’s rebuke and his own desire to know more about Barry, more about his past than that he was eleven and there and nobody believed him—*quite the extensive history with psychiatrics*, Webb had said, *the man in the lightning.* Yes, it really does have to go both ways if they’re really going to make it past trivial. He casts around for something, anything. “I spent most summers in Coast City. My family has a beach house and we’d go there every year.”

Barry doesn’t ask where that came from, or comment on just how little and insignificant it is. All he says is, “That sounds really nice.” Like he means it, like he knows just how hard it was to get even those words out.

Oliver has to swallow past a sudden lump in his throat. “It was.”
There’s another series of beeps on the scientist’s end. “That’s some more results for cases. I should probably, uh, get on that.”

“Yeah, I’ve got work, too,” he admits. “I’ll see you tonight, ok?”

“Yeah, see you,” he can practically hear the smile in Barry’s voice before the younger man hangs up. Reinvigorated and head finally clear—effects he doubts are really due to the coffee—Oliver makes his way back into Queen Consolidated.

Chapter End Notes

So new relationships can often be nerve-wracking and things don't go to plan, but these two are working through it. Next chapter will get officially into the second episode of season two "Identity", alternatively titled for this alternate 'verse "Barry and Oliver Co-Parent Roy". That's all I'm giving you guys, hope to have it out soon!
Hey guys, I made it just in time for Olivarry Week day 1: Barry working for the SCPD! It's been awesome seeing everybody else's AUs, and so here's the next installment of mine. Thanks once again for all the tremendous feedback, and enjoy!

Roy’s not expecting miracles when the Hood comes back. The Glades have never exactly been a quick fix, before or after the quake. And taking down those copycats that killed the mayor was a good first message to send; he’s tired of people around here using guns to take what they want from everybody else.

But is it so much to ask that Roy not get arrested when he tries to send the same message? They’re really going to haul some punk nobody’s ass down to the station instead of the real criminals?

He sits and glowers at everything and nothing while Laurel Lance—guess her old man finally got tired of him—attempts to interrogate him. Well tough for her, it’s not like he’d talk even if he knew anything.

His girlfriend arrives right about on schedule for these things, looking worried and angry all at once with her brother in tow. He supposes he ought to feel grateful the Queen siblings have an in with Assistant District Attorney Lance, but he rolls his eyes as the elder of the two pulls the woman aside in a classic ‘grown-ups are talking’ gesture that’s not lost on him.

Thea won’t look at him as she drags him toward the hall to wait for her brother. Roy sometimes wonders if it ever bothers her how much he treats her like the spoiled precious princess she’s trying not to be anymore.

They stop by the front as someone they both recognize hurries down the stairs. Barry Allen catches himself on the last step with the railing and looks at them quizzically before his face breaks out into an easy smile of greeting. It’s always struck him as odd how quick the other man is to smile. “Hey guys, what’re you doing here?”

“Oh, just the usual bail-my-employee-out-of-prison visit.” Thea’s voice is light, but the fact she’s opted not to use ‘boyfriend’ is a bad sign. “Apparently we were long overdue. Don’t ask about the bruise, you’ll only encourage him.”

The CSI lets out an uneasy chuckle, eyeing him sympathetically. “Ok. Either way you should really be treating that if you want it to heal faster. I’ll grab you an icepack.”

“Thanks,” he says to the offer, since the guy’s already moving to get it, heading into the bullpen just as the ADA is trying to leave it.

“Oh, excuse me, Miss Lance.”

“Not at all, Mr. Allen.”

Roy can’t help thinking the two know each other, and maybe not in a good way seeing how Lance is
frowning as she watches the man make a quick retreat into some back room, so quick he doesn’t even stop to greet his own friend, Thea’s brother.

If the older man’s insulted by it he doesn’t show it, instead making a beeline for him and Thea to usher them fully out of Laurel Lance’s way. Almost immediately after, however, he’s dismissing Thea to get their chauffer.

“I’ll always remember you fondly,” his girlfriend finally shows some concern, even if it’s probably half a joke. Like her wimp brother’s going to do anything worse than what he’s gotten tonight.

But the standard lecture he’s expecting suddenly turns on its head as Oliver Queen grips his arm so tight it’s hard not to believe he could break it if he wanted.

“I used to be a lot like you, Roy.” And what he says, about the world not working, it scares Roy—because that is exactly how he feels. He thought he’d been alone, but now this man is telling him that’s not true, but he doesn’t know how out of everyone it’s Oliver Queen who seems to get it. Silver spoons and limousines all his life. Trying to act like he knows anything about what Roy’s been through, or how any of this is going to end. “That anger’s going to put you in the hospital, kid.” Who the hell does this rich guy think he is?

“Oliver.” The man’s gaze instantly shifts past him at the sound of his name and something unreadable passes over it. The hold he has on Roy’s arm slackens, so he pulls loose and turns to meet Barry Allen as he approaches. “Here.” He holds out the promised icepack, and Roy can’t quite meet either of their eyes as he takes it with a mulish scowl.

“He’s not just angry,” the CSI is telling the billionaire pointedly. Oliver Queen doesn’t reply, but he imagines that’s more out of skepticism than anything. “Or you’d be taking it out on people you could beat, wouldn’t you Roy? You did this for somebody else.”

“What’s it to you? Either of you?” However open Barry Allen’s expression can be, he doesn’t get why Thea’s brother is sticking around. Maybe he’s hoping to get something out of him for Lance.

“Believe it or not, Roy, it matters to me that you’re going out there and getting hurt,” the other man says in answer.

“Right, cause I’m dating your sister. Well it looks like she’s stopped caring so you really don’t need to bother.” He just wants to get out of here already, but his path’s blocked by the far taller CSI and it’s not like he’s done anything to deserve being bowled over.

As if reading Roy’s mind, the scientist crosses his arms and holds firm. “Too bad, we care. So if you really feel like you’re alone out there, that nobody’s seeing what you are, here’s your chance. We’re listening.”

He waits a moment, hardly able to believe this guy is for real. He’s even got CEO Queen standing there waiting patiently! He can’t figure these two out. “I was doing it for the Glades Memorial.”

“I didn’t read about it being damaged in the quake,” Oliver Queen comments, and the hint of doubt nearly makes him want to start shouting again.

“It wasn’t. But someone keeps hijacking the medicine shipments FEMA sends them.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know!” He answers the demand equally as sharp. “But if the hospital can’t resupply they’ll be forced to close.”
“So describe them,” Barry Allen prompts him. “You must have seen at least one of the hijackers tonight. I can get you a sketch artist, she’s just in the next room, Roy—”

“Or Barry can have a look through the crime database if you don’t want to talk to the cops,” is the alternative the older man provides, voice pitched calmer and seeming to take in the way Roy’s tensed at the suggestion of involving the police. His eyes flick briefly to the other. “Right?”

“Oh, yeah,” the forensic scientist has clearly caught on, and for a brief moment Roy wonders why it is he doesn’t count him as part of the cops. Maybe because he’s the first one who’s ever wanted to hear Roy’s side of the story. “I mean I could pull some matches from the description to see if you can I.D. them.”

“Ok,” he agrees, feeling marginally more confident about this. “They were really organized, maybe a gang. The leader was some lady, with like white hair.”

It’s clear by Barry Allen’s alarmed expression and the curse Oliver Queen mutters under his breath they can skip the other steps.

“Roy, that sounds like China White, the head of the Chinese Triad.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Thea’s brother tells him.

“Well I don’t care who they are, ok?” He shoots back, determined not to show a hint of fear. “There’s loads of people at Glades Memorial that’ll die if they aren’t stopped. And right now, I’m the only one who’s trying.”

“They’ll be stopped, Roy.” It’s Oliver Queen who says it, with a quiet assuredness that nearly makes Roy believe him. Nearly.

So instead he rolls his eyes and says, “Cause that means so much coming from you. Whatever your ex-girlfriend thinks, the Hood’s the only one who’s going to do anything about it. I mean what’s it take to make you angry?”

He finally does force his way past, leaving one of them standing in the hall. Roy’s thankful at the least that it’s Barry Allen who follows him. “Roy, c’mon, that really wasn’t—”

“You know I’m right.” He stop halfway down the front steps and stares the slightly older man down. He’s conflicted, that’s easy to tell. “I’m not saying you aren’t. But you don’t need to throw it in Oliver’s face even if you guys…got off to a bad start. He really does just want to help.”

Roy shakes his head. “Why are you even friends with him? He thinks the Hood’s just some lunatic.”

The CSI doesn’t look impressed, and he knows that somewhere he’s said something wrong. “The Vigilante isn’t everything, Roy, I keep trying to tell you. I mean I hope he can stop the Triad from interfering with the supply shipments, too. You’re right that he can. Because he’s trained. You say you want to help, but when you’re getting yourself hurt then that’s something nobody wants. Not the cops, not Thea, not the Vigilante, and not Oliver.” His expression turns a little more annoyed when he adds, “And I really don’t have to explain my relationship with him to you.” Touched a nerve there, and Roy’s a little glad because at least he’s used to people being ticked off at him.

So he snags the other man’s arm as he makes to move past him. “Yeah, fine. But how else am I supposed to train? Everybody already says I’m Hood junior or whatever—maybe I want to be. If it lets me help the people in the Glades.”
“Roy…” That conflict is warring on the other man’s face again, like he wants to say something, wants to give him the answers he needs, but keeps holding back.

“Look, I get it, what the Hood does is dangerous, and he doesn’t work with people. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna stop looking for him, or teaching myself how to do what he does just cause the people who are supposed to be doing his job say so. That’s not me. I don’t think it’s you either.”

The scientist drags a hand through his hair and seems to be carefully picking his words. “Just rest up for a few days, ok? I promise the Triad’s going to be stopped, but you need to let yourself heal and not get caught up in all this. Then we can talk. Just give it a few days.”

He wants to bite out a retort at being told, again, what to do, but something gives him pause. Just who is the man promising for? “Ok.”

Roy turns and walks away from the precinct, willing for once to do as asked for now. Cause he’s starting to get the idea Barry Allen isn’t just making educated guesses about the Hood.

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“I know what you’re thinking,” Oliver wastes no time on even a hello as he enters the Cave, voice light yet with an underlying warning to it. It makes Felicity glad it’s not her he’s speaking to.

She’d only just said goodbye to Oliver and Diggle at their day jobs earlier this afternoon, heading out a good half hour before they planned to. It would be needlessly suspicious for the CEO and executive assistant of Queen Consolidated to leave work at the same time every day, after all. When Felicity had pointed out no one would even notice if the CEO and a random IT girl at Queen Consolidated left work at the same time every day, however, that point had been dismissed. She’ll have to try harder to get her old job back at this rate.

But to the point, she’d gotten to their base of operations first, joined sometime after by Barry, who’d filled her in on everything that had happened at the precinct last night while she’d told him all about Oliver’s morning visit to Glades Memorial. At least, the parts that hadn’t made it to the news.

And it’s Barry who Oliver’s immediately gone to now, passing by her monitors with a single nod of acknowledgement. She’s not offended he wants to talk to his boyfriend first—because whatever hang-up they have on the word she can call it what she wants in her mind—she only wishes for Barry’s sake it was a not so ominous sounding talk.

The scientist either doesn’t hear or ignores the foreboding tone, spinning around in his chair and eyes practically lighting up at the sight of Oliver. He’s curious, almost excited as he replies, “Great, go ahead. What am I thinking?”

“You want me to talk to Roy.”

“Well no, you talked to him last night, we both did—”

“You want me to talk to Roy as the Arrow,” the older man amends in a no-nonsense way.

“Ok yeah, that was pretty good,” Barry congratulates, grinning up at him.

Oliver doesn’t return it. “Barry, I can’t do that.”

The younger man loses the more playful mood. “I think you have to. He’s not going to listen to either of us, or anyone else. The Arrow’s who he looks up to.”
Oliver lets out a breath through his nose, shakes his head. “If I talk to him it’ll only encourage him. Or worse. I don’t think he’d keep respecting me if I told him to quit.”

“I know. But then we need to figure something else out, because he’s going to get himself really hurt if he keeps this up.”

“Well maybe we should just focus on the intel he’s given us for now,” Felicity suggests. “If he was injured last night it might keep him occupied for at least a few days.”

“He wasn’t hurt badly enough to stay off the streets,” Oliver disputes with a shake of his head.

“Actually, I got him to promise to stop for a few days,” Barry reveals. “Let somebody else try taking on the Triad. And hopefully that’ll buy us some time to figure out a plan for Roy, too.”

The other man squeezes the scientist’s shoulder briefly, affection and gratitude apparent in the gesture, before moving over to the case holding his suit. “Then that’s what we do. Felicity, what have you got on FEMA’s shipments to Glades Memorial?”

“I’m just about done accessing their schedules,” she tells him.

“You should probably suit up in the meantime,” Dig suggests, coming down the steps into the foundry. He looks like he’s just getting off the phone with someone. “I’ve got the bike and my car ready outside if you need backup.” Oliver nods, but the former army man’s tone turns wry as he adds, “The company car’s going to be in the auto shop till the end of the week while they wait for the new window.”

“I can’t believe that happened,” Barry says, shaking his head. “People in the Glades totally have a reason to be mad, but their alderman’s turning them into a mob. A lot of guys at the precinct say he’s just making it harder for police to get cooperation from the residents.”

“It’s not all that hard to make things seem like they’re us vs. them, Barry,” Diggle points out. “The people in power conspired to wipe out the Glades and everyone in it.”

The scientist grimaces, but still insists, “That doesn’t make it ok to throw a brick at you guys. Just because people are mad at Mrs. Queen, Blood thinks that makes Oliver an easy target.” His countenance is uncommonly dark for the normally cheerful man, anger and resignation warring for a place. He looks to Oliver again and advises, “Just don’t bother with him, he’ll have to give up eventually.”

“He’s issued a challenge, Barry,” the other man counters. “I have to answer it.”

“Which is exactly what he wants you to do, so he can keep coming after you.” Felicity’s only half-listening in as she continues to sneak through FEMA’s security, but she can’t help hearing the knowing tone in the younger man’s voice. Like this, in some way, is something he’s had experience with. She wonders if Oliver or John have noticed it to.

But all the latter does is agree, “Blood’s got the high ground here, Oliver.”

“And I have it now!” She exclaims along with a positive-sounding beep from her computer. “The schedules, I mean, not the high ground. Ok, it looks like the next one leaves in twenty minutes for the hospital. As long as the Triad doesn’t have anything to say about it, that is.”

“Too bad,” the vigilante remarks. “I have something to say about it.” The discussion is shelved for now as Oliver grabs up his bow preparing to head out. He hadn’t refused Diggle’s earlier offer of support, so the other man leaves with him, though not before meeting Felicity’s eye and then darting
a pointed look at Barry.

Got it.

Felicity waits until it’s just the two of them again in the Cave before turning around in her chair. “Whatever Oliver ends up deciding to do about Blood, I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, course he will. I just wish he’d think it through a little more before he does anything.”

“Well the advice you gave him was good. Kinda sounded like it came from experience,” she presses, which earns her a grimace.

“Look, it’s really not a big deal,” He tries to dismiss. “I’m sure school wasn’t always great for you either, before MIT.”

She could tell him it hadn’t been, really, that she’d often been deemed too cute to pick on or simply overlooked, that the real conflict over the path she wanted her life to take was at home with her mother the cocktail waitress. But she doesn’t. Just as much as John and Oliver, she doesn’t talk about her past. She looks at Barry, someone who’s naturally so open, and wonders if he’s learning that from them, too.

“So how come you want to help out Roy so bad? I mean, I’m not saying we shouldn’t,” she adds when he looks at her quizzically. “I just thought Oliver was the only one who knew him all that well.”

“We met that one time at Merlyn Global, and I guess I kind of gave him the impression that I support the Arrow,” he reminds, then his look shifts to something more pensive. “He stopped me to talk a couple times, while Oliver was gone. Thea doesn’t want to hear anything about it, and…I know a thing or two about people not listening.”

“Well, we’re listening.” The way he meets her gaze she knows he got what she meant. Still, though, she just has to keep talking. “Even if you don’t want to tell the whole team, I’m sure Oliver would really want to know if there’s something bothering you about how he wants to handle Blood.”

But Dig’s voice over the com cuts off any further attempts on her part with the short words, “Oliver’s been injured. Get things ready.”

The two of them are experts at rushing around by now, so the medical supplies are all at the ready for when there friend limps into the Cave, Diggle behind him keeping a close watch on his progress in case he needs some support.

Barry heads right over to him, though, hand flitting to the arm Oliver doesn’t have a hand clamped over. “Let me see.”

“They just grazed me,” Oliver gets out through gritted teeth, but allows the younger man to help him to the table. Barry helps him shrug out of the green jacket to take a look at the first wound and sucks in a breath.

“Ok, need the disinfectant first. It’s going to sting a little—which you already know.” Barry smiles a little nervously before grabbing up the wipes. “So China White got away?”

“She would have anyway,” the vigilante admits. “She had some help.”

“Yeah but it wasn’t that help that did this to him,” Diggle reveals, Oliver looking like he wants to interject but instead pursing his lips as Barry starts rubbing at the open wound with an apologetic
expression. “The police and ADA Lance have decided it’s more worth their time to target the Arrow than the Triad.”

“For real?” Barry looks personally offended by this news. “God, Oliver, I’m really sorry. I had no idea Laurel was even coordinating with the cops on this one.”

“Well it looks like she’s taking Roy a little seriously at least,” Felicity offers, trying to keep on the positive side. “Not so great that she’s taking you as a serious threat, though.”

“Maybe you ought to talk to Tommy about that, Oliver,” Dig is the one to make the suggestion. “If she’s talked to anyone about why she’s changed her mind on you, it’d be him. And you really can’t afford to have her show up in the middle of a fight with a taskforce set on only catching you.”

“I know,” the other man practically grunts. Barry’s finished taping some gauze over his arm and now kneels down to have a look at where the second bullet grazed the man’s ankle. “But I’ve handled the task force before.” When the former soldier fixes him with a pointed look, Oliver scrubs a hand over his face and looks over to her. “Felicity, see if you can pencil in a meeting with Tommy.”

“May I just point out that we are not at work and you’re penciling hand was not damaged?” He keeps the same flat stare however, and she knows she’s not going to win this one. “Fine, I will get in touch with his ‘people’.” If Stellmoor really had acquired the company, she dearly hopes these kind of jobs would have been the first eliminated, if only to put those employees out of their misery. Of course, then they’d be miserable and unemployed, so this is certainly the better option. It’d be the best option if she could just have her old job back.

“And Alderman Blood’s people as well, if you don’t mind,” he calls after her as she retrieves her tablet. “I’d like for him to stop by the company.”

“Wait, what?” Barry is the one to ask, looking up sharply from his place near the floor. “Oliver why?”

“Because it’s not us vs. them. Sebastian Blood and I are both on the same side, and I want to prove that to him.” He’s addressing all of them with that, but then casts his gaze down to Barry. “He won’t have much to come after me again with if I offer to cooperate first.” The older man favors him with just the beginnings of a smile, warm and encouraging.

Some of the tension eases in the younger’s shoulders and expression. “Be careful. More careful than this.” It’s punctuated by him ripping off another piece of tape to apply more gauze to the man’s leg.

But Oliver reaches out with his good arm and cups Barry’s face, tilting his chin back up to meet his eyes. “Well then, I guess it’s a good thing I have you for when I’m not.”

It’s so incredibly tender a gesture, Felicity feels as though she needs to hold her breath to keep from reminding the normally guarded man there’s other people in the room.

But then her tablet chirps in her hands with a notification. She looks down at it the same time Barry ducks his head with vibrantly blushing cheeks. Dig clears his throat and crosses the room, hanging up Oliver’s gear in the case.

“Um, Tommy will be available at 3:45,” she manages to stammer.

“Alright, thank you,” her boss replies, a bit more stiffly than usual. She thinks there’s a slight reddish tint to his own face as well, and it’s pretty much a sure bet he’s embarrassed, which means Felicity’s blown it as far as witnessing this kind of adorable in her life for a while now. Shoot. “Go home and get some rest. We all should.”
He makes to stand from the table and Barry jumps to his feet. A moment’s silent negotiation seems to decide things and Oliver slings an arm over the scientist’s shoulders, letting him support some of his weight as he begins hobbling to the exit.

He enters the office the next day with a far steadier gait, which can only be a good thing since they have two meetings to tackle today. Felicity’s nearly tempted to offer him coffee. Nearly.

But soon enough it’s the afternoon and in walks Tommy Merlyn. “You know, if you hadn’t asked to see me I would’ve been over here anyway. What the hell happened last night? Laurel told me she nearly caught the Hood fighting over medical supplies—”

“The Arrow was trying to stop the Triad from stealing those supplies,” Oliver stands up, apparently ready to set the record straight. “But I need to know what’s going on with Laurel. What’s made her decide I’m the one to go after?”

The other man heaves a sigh. “I don’t know. Half the Glades crumbling to the ground, the six-month absence, the copycats and wackos that have sprung up all over the place, pick something. She’s been…different, since she got her new job. I think she misses CNRI, but she won’t admit it.”

“Why can’t she just take her old job back?” Oliver asks, confused.

“They can’t get the funding to rebuild it and the staff all took jobs elsewhere or even moved out of town. It’s like it died in the quake, or…I don’t know.” He looks frustrated not knowing what exactly the problem is or how to fix it.

“Oliver, I feel like it falls under my job description to inform you Alderman Blood should be arriving for your four o’clock meeting any minute now,” she speaks up. It’s a lie, of course, there’s still a good window for him to end the conversation with his business partner and let him leave the building none the wiser.

But this gets the desired reaction; Tommy gives a start. “Blood? What are you seeing him for?”

“Cause I needed to fix the situation from yesterday and there are no cameras or people to throw things at me in here,” the billionaire tells his fellow CEO, who doesn’t look any more put at ease. So Oliver claps him on the shoulder. “I’ll be fine, Tommy.”

“I know you will, cause I’m not leaving,” the other man states, clearly having read the inherent dismissal in that. “I’ve been looking to pay him back after what he did yesterday anyway.

“It is technically company business now,” she points out. Tommy looks between them, a little amused, as Oliver draws in a breath.

“We’re not paying anybody back or picking more fights. We’re fixing things.”

“Well here he comes and he doesn’t look too eager to start fixing,” the darker-haired of the pair remarks. And it seems he’s correct as the alderman strides through the doors, looking wary as his eyes dart from first one man to the other.

Oliver starts forward, hand out, in an effort to deescalate the already rising tension. “Alderman. Thank you for coming.”

“Mr. Queen. And Mr. Merlyn. This is quite the view, gentlemen. How small the rest of us must seem from up here.”

Tommy’s welcoming smile looks even more forced as he replies, “Well maybe we have to stay up
Here considering should we happen to show our faces at say, a protest, just to show our support we have a mob turned on us."

“Well I certainly don’t recall seeing you at a protest, Mr. Merlyn, but as far as what happened to your business associate it shouldn’t be so surprising. My constituents hold a lot of anger towards both your families.”

“And they have a right to,” Oliver says before things can get too heated. “But Tommy and I, we’re both more than our parents.”

“To think we condone what they did is a mistake,” Tommy affirms. “And all we both want is to use the resources they’ve left us to make up for their own acts.”

“Well I’m sorry to have to tell two billionaires this, but not every problem can be saved by money. Real change isn’t going to happen until your elitist friends realize that it is morally unacceptable to allow thousands of its fellow citizens to live right down the street but in a third world.”

It’s a painfully poignant statement, and Felicity can only keep her eyes glued to her screen, hoping she can just make it through this meeting ignored like any other personal assistant.

Oliver, however, is undeterred. “Then let’s show them that. I’ll—we’ll,” he amends, gesturing between himself and Tommy, “host a benefit. Invite some of our ‘elitist friends’ so they can be shown what needs to be done.”

Sebastian Blood looks genuinely surprised by the suggestion when she peeks over her monitor, and even a little impressed. “People seeing you, seeing this company stand up and take responsibility and being this cause’s public face.” Just a hint of a smile starts to spread across the alderman’s face. “That could make a difference.”

“Then let’s make a difference.”

“I’ll get my people started on the arrangements,” Tommy is the one to take that initiative, which she’s honestly kind of glad for considering her lack of experience arranging anything. “You can contact me with any questions or requests, Alderman.”

Sebastian Blood looks about as pleasantly surprised as Oliver does bewildered. “I certainly will, Mr. Merlyn. And Mr. Queen, I am truly sorry for what happened outside that hospital. Sometimes my emotions get the better of me. I don’t even know how long it’s been since I laughed.”

The other two men exchange a look that’s grudgingly—at least on Tommy’s part—sympathetic. “Fighting to improve the Glades must be taxing,” Oliver acknowledges, “but I’d like for you to know that you have allies here at Queen Consolidated. If not friends.”

The alderman takes the businessman’s hand and shakes it with a crooked smile. “Well thank you, Mr. Queen. I must say, you have far surpassed any of my expectations for this meeting. Mr. Merlyn, we’ll be in touch.”

Felicity can feel the deflating bubble of tension that’s kept her sitting up ramrod straight in her chair throughout this whole thing as the man departs the office. Tommy draws in a breath and then exhales audibly. “Well that was fun. Who would’ve guessed the guy actually knows how to be civil?”

“That’s why I wanted to discuss things with him here, away from the crowds and cameras,” Oliver admits. “It’s a lot easier to keep a level head when you don’t have everyone else’s eyes on you. But really, Tommy, I appreciate your help here, but you don’t need to take point on the benefit. I’m the one who committed us to doing it.”
“Yeah, but can you commit yourself?” Oliver takes a step back, looking somewhat affronted, and Tommy smiles wanly. “I was your club manager, remember? Anything scheduled for nighttime is always iffy with you. And with this whole thing with the Triad still going on, who knows if you’ll have the time? So just let me handle the benefit and you take care of the reason we’re having it in the first place.” He claps Oliver on the shoulder and adds with confidence, “I’ve organized enough of these I could do it in my sleep.”

“I’ll be planning to be there,” the other man insists, “but sure, I’ll let you put things together. Let me know if there’s anything I can help with. And we should really meet up sometime, the three of us. You, me, and Laurel. Get dinner or something.”

“You got it. And hey, feel free to bring, uh, someone along,” his co-CEO offers. When Oliver says nothing in reply, Tommy seemingly decides it’s time for him to return to his own office. “Oh, you’re totally emailing Isabel about this benefit. Since you did commit us and all.”

Oliver smiles tightly and acknowledges that with a nod. “Right.” He turns to her once it’s just the two of them in the office again. “Well, Felicity? How do you think this’ll go over with the rest of the team?”

“It’s not a bad plan, and the alderman seems to strangely like you now,” she has to admit. “I don’t see why there’d be any problems.” Still, her and Diggle’s shared concern about Barry sits heavy in her gut, and before she knows it she’s speaking again. “Oliver, I really think you should talk to Barry, though. The way he was reacting last night, it seemed like he—”

“I know.” The weight to the words is what convinces her more than the words themselves, and she regards him with some shock. His tone turns a little wry as he continues, “And I am grateful for all the help you and John are always ready to give me—but you do not have to act surprised every time I notice something about Barry on my own.”

Felicity feels guilt now, too, which is a completely wonderful combination, really. “I didn’t mean I thought you didn’t notice Barry, or notice when he was upset or—he just wouldn’t talk to me about it so I thought I should let you know.”

“Well thanks,” he tells her sincerely. “I promise I’ll see what I can do.”

She gives him a small smile, relieved. “I’ll help you draft the email to Isabel Rochev.”

His own face slips into an expression more pained than anything. “Please do.”

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Tommy surprises her later in the week with flowers and a fancy invitation to The Glades Memorial Benefit. “Hosted by yours truly,” he tells her with a winning smile.

“Then how could I refuse?” Laurel replies, kissing his cheek before going to get a vase for the bouquet. At least one of them is making some headway in alleviating the hospital’s woes.

At the benefit itself she’s reintroduced to Isabel Rochev, who’s just the slightest bit warmer than before the merger. A few of the other guests come speak with her and Tommy for a short while as they arrive, but she can’t help noticing there’s a lack of someone she’d figured would be bound to be here.

“Mr. Merlyn?” It’s Oliver’s secretary who’s approached them, looking a little tense as she keeps her eyes on Tommy. “Could I speak to you for a minute?”
“Of course, Ms. Smoak. I’ll bring back some champagne, Laurel,” he adds to her with a smile, then follows the blonde woman across the room.

Laurel sighs and resists the urge to check her watch. As Tommy’s girlfriend she should be here, and of course wants to be here to support both him and this benefit’s cause. She can’t help thinking she could be doing more good out there, though, continuing to work with the task force. It’s clear that the Hood has an interest in these medical shipments to Glades Memorial, and one’s just left. It’s frustrating to know she’ll probably miss her chance to catch the man under that hood and bring him in for justice once and for all.

“You look like a woman who’s waiting for someone.”

Laurel turns at the sound of the familiar voice. She’s of course heard the alderman of the Glades on television and even run into him in person before. They’re both in something of the same line of work, after all. “Just my boyfriend. Tommy’s gone to get us drinks.”

“Tommy. Merlyn?” The man guesses, just a hint of a frown tugging at his lips. “I hadn’t realized you were so close with one of the owners of this company.”

“Oh, both of them,” she corrects. “Oliver and I are very old friends. So you can imagine how I feel about you putting him in the crosshairs of public opinion, alderman,” she finishes with a sugar-sweet smile.

Blood has the grace to look a little sheepish at the least. “For what it’s worth, I’ve apologized to Oliver for my rhetorical excesses. In fact it is that détente which brings us all here tonight. So where is Oliver, now? This is his benefit, after all.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Alderman,” Tommy has returned to her side with a couple of drinks, one of which he offers to her. “As we discussed, this benefit is the people’s. Those in the Glades who are desperately lacking resources. It was decided by the company that Oliver’s presence would detract from that given the current stir in the media—but everything here tonight was paid for out of his personal account. And instead of an address from any one of us elites, as you might put it, we’ve invited staff from Glades Memorial to provide testimony as to how bad the situation has gotten.”

Sebastian Blood’s eyebrows raise to his hairline. “I’ll admit, Mr. Merlyn, I’m impressed. This benefit might do some good after all.” The man lifts his glass in something of a toast.

Tommy’s smile is still tight as they both do the same. “We can only hope.”

“That was a nice save,” Laurel comments to her boyfriend after the other man has walked away.

He gives her a smug grin. “I thought so, too. Probably won’t stop Blood from making some passive-aggressive remark the next time we have to deal with him, but hey it beats nothing.”

Laurel knows Tommy isn’t exactly the alderman’s number one fan, and he’s also not high on her list given the many thinly veiled diatribes he’s directed first to her boyfriend and now her friend. It’s still good for the people in the Glades to have someone speaking up for them though, she can’t help thinking. Someone on the right side of the law, anyway.

But she doesn’t really want to get into that here. Instead she asks, “So where is Oliver really?”

She takes a delicate sip from her glass and notices the way the man pauses. “I don’t know, exactly. Just that he’s working on a different angle that he’s really hoping might do some good.”

“Well I for one will be very interested to see what that is,” it’s Isabel who makes the remark, having
found them again. “Ms. Smoak just informed me he will not be here tonight. Mr. Merlyn, I will be expecting your support when I speak to Mr. Queen about this tomorrow. Even if he is your friend you cannot condone risky business decisions such as this.”

“Of course, Ms. Rochev,” he promises, his smile slipping as soon as the other woman disappears back through the crowd. “Some people. Can’t we just consider this benefit a success? It’s going to get people talking about the issue, maybe even doing something about it.”

“Which is a nice change from them trying to pretend that nothing’s wrong,” she agrees.

“Exactly. We should hold more of these. Maybe even one for CNRI,” he suggests, trying to make it casual by taking a sip of his drink afterward.

Laurel does her best not to sound irritated with him as she tells him for the umpteenth time, “There is no more CNRI, Tommy. There’d be nothing to hold a benefit for.”

“Buildings can be rebuilt.”

“And that would just be pretending that it never happened. And I can’t do that.” Can’t he see that, much like he wants Merlyn Global to disappear into Queen Consolidated, she also can’t return to her old life? Everything she’d worked for, used to support herself those five long years, reduced to rubble in a matter of minutes. How futile it had all felt. She downs the rest of her drink.

Tommy’s watching her, clearly worried and apologetic. “I’m sorry, Laurel. I just want you to be happy, whatever you’re doing.”

Of course he does. She sighs. “I am happy, Tommy. I’m making far more of a difference now working to bring down the Hood.”

He doesn’t exactly seem convinced, but the rest of the benefit goes off without a hitch. It’s when she gets home to a messages that the Vigilante was involved in another altercation with the Triad, but got away, that her night really gets worse.

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Barry enters Big Belly Burger and starts scanning the modestly packed fast food joint for the person he’s here to meet. He spots him in the corner booth, back to the wall. Typical.

So he slides in across from the younger man. “Hey Roy, sorry I’m late. Had some tests to finish running at the lab.”

The other shrugs. “I figured. Just glad you got my message.”

“Kind of hard to miss it when you taped it to my computer, which I’m not gonna even ask how you got into a locked crime lab.” Just the barest of smirks from Roy at that, but he also does not divulge the information.

They’re interrupted by a familiar waitress stopping by their table. “Hey Barry, good to see you,” Carly greets him with a genuine smile and friendly touch to the shoulder, and he feels badly all over again for John that the man’s had to let such a kind woman go. “How’ve you and Oliver been?”

“Uh…” he thinks his mind goes completely blank except for the thought did Dig tell her? “Good?”

There’s no hidden meaning to her look as she replies, “That’s good. Oh, and how about, it was Felicity, wasn’t it? How’s she doing?”
“Fine. She got a promotion,” he tells her, and neglects to mention said promotion is very unwanted.

“Well great! I just want you guys to know you don’t need to be strangers here. So then, did you want your regular?”

He smiles. “Yeah, thanks Carly.”

“And how about you?” Roy, who’s been watching the whole exchange with something like amused judgement on his face, orders and Carly heads back to the kitchen.

Barry clears his throat. “So what did you want to talk about?”

“It’s about the Hood.”

“Oh.” He tries not to squirm in his seat. Between stopping the Triad from hijacking the medical supply shipments and the tricky dealings with Sebastian Blood—which Barry hadn’t done much more than fret about, really, and needlessly at that because of course Oliver was going to handle his fight against the bully of an alderman better than he’d ever been able to struggle against his childhood adversaries, anyone would—they honestly hadn’t talked much over what to do about Roy.

In the here and how, though, the other man’s waited patiently enough for something, so Barry thinks desperately over what is safe to tell him as he starts, “Listen, I’m sorry I sort of…told you to lay off what was happening with Glades Memorial. I know it couldn’t have been easy for you. But the Vigilante did stop the Triad. And maybe you getting brought into the station did help, uh, bring that to his attention. So there’s definitely other ways you could help him out than fighting—”

“There are other ways,” the younger man interrupts, then leans forward over the booth, his voice pitched low. “I talked to him.”

“Wait, what?” He can’t quite contain the perplexity in his tone. Since when had that been the agreed-upon plan? Last he’d checked, Barry had been the one pushing for it with Oliver reluctant.

“But he asked you to stop?” Barry checks, feeling as though he needs to confirm they’re both talking about the same man in a hood.

“Well yeah, but that’s cause he wants me to do something for him,” Roy explains hurriedly, clearly eager to get to the good part, whatever that is. “He wants me to be his eyes and ears in the Glades. Let him know when something’s going on so he can put a stop to it.” He’s looking for some kind of reaction, and Barry probably couldn’t disappoint if he tried.

“Roy, that’s— that’s awesome!” It’s genius and he could kiss Oliver for coming up with it. A way for Roy to feel involved without getting hurt. It’s then that the food’s brought over and he takes that time to sober a bit. “I meant that unofficially, though, you know? Cause, uh, I can’t exactly—actually why are you telling me this?”

The other man shrugs and swallows down a mouthful of burger before saying, “I don’t know. You’re the only one I really can.”

He feels a little touched, in all honesty, by the vulnerable words, no matter how bluntly Roy states them. “Well, thanks. I’m glad you felt you could.”

“I don’t know why,” the other reiterates, like he’s realized he’s given something away, and Barry thinks he sees in more ways than one how Roy is a lot like Oliver. “It’s not like you owe me
anything. And I—look, I guess I wanted to apologize. For going off on your friend. Heard about the
benefit his company put on for this. Maybe he’s not as bad as I thought.”

“Well maybe you and Oliver should try to get to know each other a little better before deciding you
can’t stand each other next time, huh?” He suggests, just managing to suppress a smile at the
knowledge that Roy already knows more than he realizes. “C’mon, for Thea at least.”

That at last coaxes a smile from the younger man. “Sure. But she doesn’t really get how you’re
friends with her brother either.”

Barry feels his eyebrows raise. He hadn’t realized the young woman paid him much mind. It’s both
amusing and terrifying suddenly to picture her reaction to learning just how close he is growing to
Oliver. Does Thea even like him as things are now? “Should I be worried?”

“I thought you didn’t have to explain to anybody?” The other reminds him with a smirk.

“Yeah, well, I have a sort-of sister. I know that wrath.”

A chuckle seems to escape from the usually stoic man, and it’s then it really hits Barry how much
Roy sorely needs someone to talk to about things, even other than the Arrow. He thinks he’s found
something he really can help Oliver with.

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He holds the position for about a minute and a half longer than he normally does, then releases his
breath in a frustrated sigh. Oliver drops down from the salmon ladder and pads across the mat to
where a towel and water bottle sit waiting for him.

And of course, that’s when the door to the foundry opens. “Sorry I’m late!” The exasperated frown
he’s determined to wear threatens to tick up into a smile just at the other man’s voice. That should be
a worrying sign. “You will never guess who I got lunch with today.”

He turns his head to catch sight of Barry’s approach with an arched brow. “That’s a worrying
statement from the person I’m seeing, but go ahead.”

The scientist rolls his eyes. “You know what I meant.” He’s stopped just before mats and has to rock
onto his toes in order to place a quick peck on Oliver’s cheek, and when he pulls away he’s beaming
with pride and joy at him. “Roy was just telling me all about his new job.”

He gets it instantly, and though he knows it would’ve had to have been discussed with the team soon
enough, he can’t help a small twinge of annoyance. “He’s already bragging about it?”

“No! No, he just wanted to tell me. I mean he’s probably guessed by now I’m on your side.”

“And you need to be more careful about that,” he can’t help admonishing, his and Tommy’s talk
about Laurel coming to mind. “You think you’re a nobody but you’re not, Barry. People notice you.
Roy has, anyway.” And considering how they’d been completely taken by surprise at the police
presence that first night he’d gone after the Triad, the ADA has at least decided to assume the CSI is
a potential leak.

“That is a really negative way of telling me I’m special,” Barry comments with a teasing grin. “But
seriously, Roy really is excited about doing this for you. And I’m really happy you found a
compromise, with him and Blood.” He ducks his head then, seemingly shy and ashamed. “I
shouldn’t have doubted you, Oliver. I’m really sorry.”
“If it weren’t for Tommy, you’d be saying you told me so,” Oliver informs him, and Barry looks back up. “He’s the one who really handled the damage control with Sebastian. I couldn’t balance that and fighting the Triad,” he notes, discouraged.

“There is such a thing as overextending yourself, you know,” Barry counters. “That’s what you have a team for, even Tommy and Roy. It doesn’t mean you’re failing. You can rely on us.” He says it so earnestly, standing there before him with hazel eyes warm and compassionate, that Oliver can’t help but to believe him. He could lose himself in that gaze, and it’s really just fortunate they don’t have an audience like a few nights ago for him to make a fool out of himself.

He sets aside the water bottle to instead reach out to lay his hand on the other man’s shoulder. “It must have felt like I wasn’t relying on your advice much this week. I’m sorry if—well, Felicity seems to think I should talk to you about that.” He feels it the instant the scientist tenses up, and so gently squeezes, hoping to reassure him. “It’s only if you want.”

Barry shakes his head with a rueful smile. “It’s really not all that worth getting into. Just some kids—a lot of kids—picked on me. Cause of my dad. I mean, everybody knew about it, it was all over the papers, and I guess that made it easier for them. I didn’t do myself any favors,” the scientist remarks with chagrin, “insisting on what I’d seen. I still haven’t been able to prove it was possible.”

Oliver has to struggle a few moments to reign in his anger hearing the resignation and implicit acceptance in the other’s tone, but there’s something more important he needs to address. “Barry, I know I don’t talk about it a lot, but my time away those five years…I saw things that defy explanation. You don’t have to worry about me not believing you.” And he has to pull the other into his arms at the look of desperate gratitude that gets him, tucking his head under his chin. Barry’s breath hitches, then washes over his bare skin in a rush as he relaxes into the embrace. “Whenever you’re ready, we can talk.” Considering how patient he has to be with Oliver on a regular basis, this is the least he can give the man.

“Thank you,” Barry murmurs. “I really appreciate that, but can I take you up on it some other time? I really did want to start training again today.”

He hums in agreement and presses his lips to the other’s hair briefly before releasing him. “I hope by that you just mean training with me. We’ll have lost a lot of progress if you’ve taken a break for half a year.”

“Well what was I supposed to do, join a gym? Head out onto the streets with Roy?” Barry volleys back as he toes off his shoes and socks. He hopes the look he sends him conveys the message of don’t you dare he’s intending to send. “Besides,” the scientist adds as he hangs his jacket off the back of a chair, “I thought you liked being my personal trainer.”

He smirks, but doubt prickles at his mind. “And you?” Barry has taken a six-month hiatus from it after all, and if he’s only doing this now out of obligation…”If this isn’t something you’re interested in—”

“Did you seriously forget our first real fight?” The younger man asks in disbelief. “I am definitely still interested, and probably even more now. I mean, it’s you, me, and you shirtless. What about that wouldn’t hold my interest?”

It’s enough to make him laugh, and Barry looks pleased with himself even as he blushes faintly. It reminds him of the other night in the foundry again, Barry with face practically aflame, on his knees with a hand still laid on Oliver’s leg—and he really needs to think of something else.

So he retorts, “This is starting to feel a little inequitable,” and nods pointedly to Barry who has now
shed a sweater and button down, but still wears his undershirt.

Barry crosses his arms over his chest. “Yeah, no. Maybe the day I magically develop six-pack abs.”

Undeterred, Oliver gives him a rakish grin, “Then we better get started.”

He should really be tougher on the other man for the loss of progress that’s occurred, considering how quickly he’s able to take him down to the mat. But he ignores that in favor of getting away with slipping hands under the stupid shirt to run freely over soft skin as he claims the mouth of the man beneath him in a dominating kiss. Barry shudders and gasps, clinging to his back as his lips move together with his own.

And if they only get a few rounds of actual sparring in before the rest of their team shows up…well, it’s honestly better than Oliver was expecting of them.

Chapter End Notes

If you want more information about Olivarry Week, check out this blog. Thanks again!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!