What Wouldn't I Do

by BookofLife

Summary

We all know that Slade killed Oliver's mother: we were there, we saw it. But where was Felicity? What would she have done if she'd known? How would it have changed things?

Notes

What absolutely could have happened episode 2x20, before Slade kills Oliver's mother. PLEASE comment... I need to know if should stop while I'm ahead because my writing sucks or not.
Part 1

What Wouldn’t I Do

Part 1

This late at night, with the softest of artificial hums stemming from her already-state-of-the-art-but-still-modified-anyway-because-she-couldn’t-help-her-self server collection and the gentle glow of the three monitors before her, Felicity was able to relax, *finally*.

Or at least she should have been able to.

But Roy was sleeping *right* behind her.

Sleeping. She preferred that word over forceful sedation via *venom*. Tibetan Pit Viper Venom to be exact. Procured and facilitated by an ex-member of a beyond dangerous and mythical organisation known as the League of Assassin’s. *Could my life get any stranger than this?* If she were a different person than the one Oliver Queen had met two years ago she’d have probably passed out from the shock a long while ago. Either that or run a mile in the opposite direction of Starling and the polar equivalent of Vegas… Maybe Canada. Or England.

Then again… Recent events led her think that maybe she possessed more courage than she thought she had. Felicity had a love-hate relationship with mysteries and it tended to make her braver. She was still the same person whose ever processing mental state had quite happily switched off its capacity for logical thought when Oliver had first walked into her office at Queen Consolidated. Tall, chiselled, built, beautiful, blue eyed… *Handsome* didn’t scrape the surface.

*Wow,* had been the only word (if you can call it a word) swimming alone and uninhibited in her previously branded genius intellect. *I’m only human.*

But her virtuoso brain had switched back on, quick as a flash, when he’d presented to her his laptop full of bullet holes. And then that lame excuse… and his small smile. There was no way she’d have ever ended up *not* involved in this. With Oliver and the Arrow. With this crusade that she could see was slowly starting to chip at the core at what made him… well, Oliver.

The man was so much more than what he obviously saw in the mirror every day. *Which was probably why there isn’t one in his bathroom down here.* Pursing her lips, her nails tapped in a
dance that was more computer phonetics than rhythmic reminiscence. The man was insufferable. She could still see, clearly, the guilt on his face over Roy’s condition. It didn’t matter that he hadn’t 
infected Roy with Mirakuru. It hadn’t occurred to him that Roy too, wouldn’t have blamed him for his actions if he were in the right mind to do so. There had been no other option but to seal him down in the Foundry, where she now stood, pondering to herself not half an hour after Sara’s departure to who knows where. She’d turned her phone off too; GPS and all.

Hmm. She frowned.

Three minutes after deciding that Dim Sum for one was actually not such a good idea, that she wasn’t anywhere near hungry enough or in the right mood to eat the delicious Chinese food of the gods (she’d only used it as a way for the team to unwind together), she’d turned around to find that Sara had left the Foundry. John had also escaped prime time via the alley exit way for a not-so-secret rendezvous with Lyla. She was alone suddenly with her comatose friend… and Oliver.

…Who had looked just as depressed as he had when he’d entered the lair.

She’d asked him, quietly, if he was alright as he’d stood there facing his Arrow suit (she’d wiped it down after his skirmish with Roy), his diner jacket already shrugged on. He’d simply let out a breath, murmuring an almost unheard, “I’m fine” before dragging himself back up those stairs. Passing her he’d met her stare momentarily. “You staying here a while?”

Her head bobbed. “A little while.” Then indicated towards the bag she kept safely tucked in the cabinet next to their pistol supply. “Probably do a little yoga.”

The intense despondency on his face had lifted, slightly. “Okay.” And then he’d left.

Oliver… he had such a large heart. The capacity for greatness. But said organ held the capability to absorb so much darkness that Felicity often wondered how Oliver moved around at all with the weight of it. She and Dig… they did what they could to lighten the load. But in the end it was up to him.

She couldn’t help the way her eyes softened, the way her fingers ceased to tap, relaxing against the cool surface of her computer counter as she thought at the tender grace a man of such strength, with the capacity for brute ferocity, could sometimes display. At how much he genuinely cared about people.
She hated how he was hobbling. Blown kneecap or not, it didn’t seem right how a man like Oliver Queen could be limping when Sara was walking, purposefully, away from him. “Sara-” He tried but the strawberry-blond warrior was too far gone. Both physically and mentally.

“Your mother’s rally starts in half an hour: I’d start getting dressed if I were you.”

Felicity pressed her lips together. Sara’s tone could have frozen a roaring fire.

Torn between standing and doing something and sitting to continue their search for Roy, felicity perched on the edge of her chair, hands gripping the sides, watching Oliver as he watched his girlfriend stomp out of the Foundry. Their home. What should she do? In this instance she agreed, completely, with Oliver. Roy was her friend. She didn’t want him to die. If there was even the slightest chance he could be saved she’d take it. And in this she and Oliver were simpatico. It hadn’t been Sara he’d looked to for a gesture of reassurance…

Then he turned, eyes finding hers. She stayed still, remained seated. Waiting.

He let out a weary, acquiescent exhale and moved over to the nearest solid surface. Leaning backwards against the worktable he rested his leg against the rim of the metallic coolness, his gaze falling to somewhere between the ‘here’ and the ‘there’ in that deep, dark place held in his mind. ‘Here there be monsters’.

“She reminds me so much of me after I came home.” The words were murmured without care or thought. He’d long since grown unbelievably comfortable sharing his thoughts with her. Felicity shifted, slowly standing as he continued. “When it seemed impossible to believe in anything even resembling hope.”

Finally he looked towards her again. That understanding. Again they ere of the same mind. Or was he also wondering about her thoughts on the not-so-secret losing battle of wills between himself and woman he was sleeping with? “But you did.” She reminded him, stepping closer. It was difficult not to touch him, to comfort him… “Eventually. Sara will too.”

His slight nod was followed by another exhale and his gaze fell back down. Contemplative.

“I had help.”
Felicity blinked, watching him as those pervasive eyes once again sought hers. It took her a moment for his meaning to sink in and her surprise must have been obvious because the sheer sincerity that immediately spread across his features took her breath away. “I had help.” He repeated, low, firmly but still very gently. As he always was with her. Even when they were fighting. But his insinuation was a little difficult for her to…

And then he continued. “But so does she.”

Oh Oliver…

It was like he knew, really, where his relationship with Sara could lead, was leading. Unlike himself, Sara wasn’t bending, changing, and yielding to code of the vigilante lifestyle that she, Diggle and Oliver adhered to. She could almost hear his thoughts. ‘She has me …and I’m not enough’. ‘Am I doing something wrong?’ ‘Is there anything else I could do?’

It hurt. It hurt Felicity to see him in a place she couldn’t reach. “Was it Laurel?”

The space between his brows crinkled. “Laurel?”

Her head tilted slightly sideways. “Was it Laurel, the woman you love, who broke through your…” Her hand gestured towards the whole of his green leather self. “Idealism?” Felicity knew it wasn’t but she was reaching for a point.

The word ‘idealism’ seemed to offend him and she knew why. He’d never consider his aspirations to be ideal in any way, shape or form. But he let it go. “No.” He shook his head, voice still soft, still quiet. “No it wasn’t her.” He looked her over. “I don’t love Laurel, Felicity.” Head slowly shaking a ‘no’ he continued. “Not that way, at least. Not anymore.”

She nodded. “Okay.” That was usually his word.

A strange smile, hinting of irony, was slow to creep up on him and he quelled it almost before she caught a glimpse of it. “It feels like forever since I felt that way…”

“Tempus fugit.” It just came out.
He blinked. “What?”

Feeling a little shy at how he was just watching her, which was utterly ridiculous by now, she straightened her glasses and spoke. “It’s Latin. For ‘Time flies’.” Her head performed a little self-conscious gestured that she immediately cursed feeling a flush already starting to spread on her cheeks-

“Tempus fugit.” He repeated, nodding and he was smiling slightly, agreeing with her. “It really does.”

Her returning smile was more than a little grateful. “You know who you love Oliver. Who matters to you the most in this world and who makes the most impact to you personally.” Her tone made clear the distinction…

But as she observed him she silently wondered at the way his eyes seemed to… change somewhat, the confusion held there transforming with a degree of clarity she didn’t understand. The jaw lines on his face hardened and softened all at once and she cleared her throat. “Whose opinion do you think matters most to Sara?”

There was nothing but silence as he stared at her.

Erm… It was a simple enough question, right? Yet there was obviously something in what she said that seemed to stop him completely. “Oliver?”

Tentative, she took a step towards him.

She saw his Adam’s apple bob up and down. “Felicity…” He licked his lips, opening his mouth to speak again… but then he just shook his head. “We should get back to work. Find out where Roy is.”

And then he pushed up and away from the table and all thought, all ‘anything’, anything other than ‘right now’ disappeared into the dark corners of the lair. She’d forgotten how close she was standing to him. Unfolding himself from the workbench put him just inches in front of her face. But that wasn’t the problem: they’d been this close and closer before. It was part of the vigilante job. The problem was that with their words and the silence in the lair, with the way that his eyes were now super soft and yielding, to her, with how he seemed to stare right into her, taking a long inhale, as if breathing in her presence before those unbelievably pretty blue eyes of his flickered
with gratitude she was reminded yet again of the all the things her mind had endeavoured (and obviously failed) to squash down.

She hadn’t moved away from him, or at all, attempting blasé as he smiled at her before leaving to change clothes. In his absence however her exhale (an inhale she’d been holding onto for over a minute) was shaky and affected. It made her feel foolish. So again, she ignored it. What was the point anyway? He would never look at her the way he looks at Sara. And she wouldn’t want him to. His eyes always shone with respect and fondness, sometimes annoyance (which admittedly she knew she could cause) whenever he spoke with her. She valued their friendship. They were, all of them, family.

When all was said and done and they’d found Roy, or rather he’d found them, everything seemed to have altered. And yet nothing really had.

She rolled her eyes at herself. *I’m being melodramatic.*

Having already changed into her tight, three-quarter yoga pants and vest she felt the cool air of their secret lair settle down on her and brought her hands up over her arms, warming them. Instinctively, her eyes locked on a piece of fabric, neatly folded alongside the few affects Roy had on his person. Oliver’s grey hoodie.

She’d taken it out of hiding when they’d brought Roy down, thinking, even though he was in a coma of sorts, that he might be cold just lying there on the metal table. But a Mirakuru enhanced body equalled a very hot bloodied Roy. So she’d left it on the side just in case. It looked *really* tempting about now.

She was supposed to be doing yoga but the moment she changed she knew that wasn’t happening. *Too much going on up here.* She touched her skull as if someone was there to watch her do it- then rolled her eyes. *I really am absurd.*

Eyeing her beloved computers she made up her mind. *Might as well get on with it.* Strolling forwards she sat down in her chair, activating her tracking site. Since Thea’s capture at Slade’s hands Felicity had been making regular checks on the status of her team mates and the Queen siblings. Placing an anonymous tracker in Thea’s phone (she’d slipped it onto her phone one late evening as the girl working away from the Verdant Office) had been easy enough and she’d been checking every 20 minutes or so to make sure Thea was where she was supposed to be. That Oliver, Diggle, Sara, Laurel even Lance – were all safe and accounted for.

Lately it was all she could think about.
She was just three seconds from pulling up a micro-feed of suspicious activity at her previous place of employ, Queen Consolidated, when her system went haywire.

**Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep!!!!**

Immediately her eyes hot from one screen to the next. “Oh no…” A message popped up, clear as day on each flashing screen: *Tracking single 001OQ, signal 209TQ leaving designated zone.* Oliver and Thea… they were outside of Starling. “What’s going on?” Accessing GPS feed she found their locator signals were very present, crystal clear. Stable. But wherever they were it wasn’t the Queen Mansion, which is where she was positive Oliver stated he was going along with his mother and sister. To have stopped outside of Starling, in a direction he didn’t normally travel, if *ever*…

Something was wrong.

She dove out of her chair, reaching for her bag on the floor for her mobile and called Oliver. “Come Oliver, pick up.” It rang. And ran. “Pick up, pick up…”

The line cut dead and the long tone sounding after it made her blood run cold. Oliver’s GPS cut blank instantaneously and she stared at the monitor.

Slade?

It was her first thought. A smart one, for he’d been around all of five minutes before blowing the lid on Oliver’s self-control only a couple of months prior. It made sense that he would be her first thought. *Calm down Felicity: it might be nothing*… “Yes, he could just be taking a much needed breath of fresher air…with his mother and sister… and he probably stamped on his phone because he wants some down time… *with his mother and his sister*… who he wouldn’t put in harm’s way for the world and they’re in the middle of nowhere, *frack!*”

She was already typing away, *already* calling Dig’s mobile but a groan of her rising anxiety wormed its way out of her. He’d turned his phone off. *And* his house number was disconnected. Of course it was: sexy times with the missus was probably a rare commodity for him these days. But she needed him. Right now.

Her head whipped around, instinctively searching for help. All she found was unconscious Roy. And Sara was still incommunicado. “Of course she is.” The words came out in a quiet, self-
deprecated hash of fear and insecurity. *What am I going to do?* She couldn’t call Lance. Not now.
If it was Slade there next to nothing Quentin Lance could do to help her.

She was on her own.

“Oh God…”

Standing there, in the Foundry, in her yoga gear she’d never felt so alone, so terrified as she did right then and there. The air was so still…

…And Oliver had been with his only remaining family. And his knee was beyond fractured; he was vulnerable. Anything could be happening right now. She was just *standing* there. It could be nothing but if it wasn’t…

Closing her eyes she swallowed down the climbing panic that had engulfed her oesophagus. Biting her lip as she opened them again and made a decision, one that turned and stilled her entire being but she didn’t think about. She’d curl into a ball and shake if she did. Already slipping her arms into Oliver’s grey hoodie she hurried over the Roy, checking his pulse rate and making sure he had enough venom to stay down for the night.

She had to move. Now. Fast. And she actually had a plan. One half-baked but what could you expect with so little time? Almost running to the door a glint of metal caught her eye and she stopped, turning, seeing them… rushing back she grabbed at the objects of her attention and buried them in the large pockets of her (Oliver’s) hoodie before almost hurling herself towards the alley way exit door: time was running out.
Part 2

Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be a three part story but it'll probably be between four and seven. Please leave a comment :)

Part 2

“What am I doing?”

Hands clenched so tightly around the wheel her knuckles were white in the honest darkness of night. “Oh God, what am I actually doing?” Her car swerved violently to the right. “Waaah!” She righted just before her heart could burst free from her rib cage. “I’ve done some pretty eyebrow rising stuff in my life- seriously I have gone to that place that makes people raise their brows in extreme disapproval but this is just…” Whatever this ‘just’ was she stepped on the accelerator, anxiety pushing her to be reckless. Which was an impossibility in the universe of Felicity Smoak. Felicity Smoak didn’t do ‘reckless’.

Yet, her so-called ‘plan’ wasn’t so much a plan as her basically… winging it. For lack of a better term. Just thinking about what she may have to do soon made her insides shrivel.

She’d shake her head at herself if her neck wasn’t so stiff from over thinking the dangers of breaking the speed limit. As if remaining rigid in her seat would stop the car from inevitably crashing. This time I’m the idiot; I’m not a genius right now! Felicity Smoak is excused! How could this possibly work?! Even her thoughts trembled.

Following a curve on route she whispered to herself. “John, I really need your help right now.”

I need to feel like this is going to end well.

She didn’t feel secure.

Oliver…

She’d left Diggle a dozen texts. When he finally switched on his phone he was going to hate himself. Her phone was once again already by her ear: she couldn’t help it. “Hey Dig? Yeah it’s me. Felicity. Which you already, ah, know.” Yep, my intelligence factor just crashed. “I’m tracking Thea’s GPS. I sent you the coordinates in the text before the mail that’s BEFORE this voice message. If I’m right and there’s a big problem, some back-up would absolutely not go amiss. Yup, so I need you to come get me because I’m breaking just about every rule in your macho, army based, brotherhood rulebook right about now. And I meant that as a compliment.” She took a breath biting her lip. “Love you John. If you can’t make it and something does happen it wasn’t your fault okay? But if you can make it, if you get this message…Hurry.”

Turning her phone to silent she shoved it into the pocket of the grey hoodie and noticed she was already at her destination. It was a dirt road. The path progressed in a swirl ahead of her but the darkness made it impossible to see anything too far beyond the greenery. No other cars nearby, she’d have to go in further… but if there were anybody actually down there, if Oliver… if Oliver
and his family were in danger…

She’d have to go by foot. Choose stealth over a few tonnes of metal shielding.

It was insane. Me against the bad guy.

Felicity breathed what felt like her second intake of air since she’d left the Foundry. “Oh, I’m a dead woman…”

That’s what she’d said…

But if she was a dead woman she wasn’t going down without a fight. Her car was parked a few hundred yards behind her and before leaving her baby there she’d taken a vital component or two out of the trunk. Felicity looked down at the large, black object in her hands and swallowed.

“…Never in any sane world did I think I’d be using this.”

‘This’ being Helena’s crossbow of vengeance.

They’d commandeered- I prefer commandeered to stolen even if it’s not precise exactly- the item after Helena’s arrest and it had sitting in the boot of Felicity’s compact car ever since. For safe keeping. It wasn’t as if she was ever going to use it. But seeing it again… after having it shoved in her face last year by the Huntress herself… it made her think… if maybe she could. If she had to. One day. Maybe.

A weapon was a weapon and Felicity knew that she wasn’t exactly a warrior woman like Sara or a motorcycle riding, crossbow toting predator, or an assassin… she wasn’t dangerous, with extra emphasis on the ‘danger’ part… like Oliver. Or prepared and capable like Diggle. Or even street smart and physically agile like Roy, no she was Felicity.

His IT girl. Superior physicality didn’t play well with computer genius.

…She just thought it might come in handy.

Nobody had realised she’d taken it; not even Oliver who, with eyes like the hawk he sometimes was, had glanced over to her with his querying gaze after he’d seen her staring solemnly at the footage of Helena’s arrest and subsequent interrogation.

No… she hadn’t wanted him to see her take it. It was silly, right? Not in any place in her life had Felicity wanted to be that way, like those Kung-Fu goddesses on TV, because she knew no matter how hard she tried it would never happen. Ever. ‘Felicity’ wasn’t Sara, wasn’t Helena or Laurel or Isabel or Shado or even Mckenna. She was Felicity Smoak: MIT, class of 09.

It wasn’t as if she’d never wished she could be like that. Of course I haven’t. I mean I can’t even use it properly…

Well…

That wasn’t, ah, entirely true.

Her lips pressed together, heartbeat racing as she drew closer to ‘wherever’ within the foliage.

…If Oliver ever found out about her after hours practice with this super lethal looking crossbow… or his, ahem, actual longbow bow… oh boy.

He’d probably lose it. For sure. He’d never before approved of the idea of her going out into the
field. But it had been a little addictive. *And soothing!* *Soothing’s good, right? And it wasn’t even about the shooting arrows thing - who wants to actually hurt people anyway - no it had been about the mechanics of it. She liked using her fingers – *though that sounds increasing dirty and I would very much like to go revise that particular ‘like’ of mine for future vernacular purposes but now is absolutely not the right time* - about how she had to actually clean the crank mechanism and bowstring, about how when she pulled it back, locking it into position with its surprisingly dainty trigger mechanism, she had felt each and every muscle in her arms flex. How after two nights of practice her biceps had felt like dead weights and she’d been surprised by that. *Who knew?*

Now, in the crossbow’s taut string was a bolt filled with Pit-Viper venom. A second sat beneath it. A last resort. She’d loaded both bolts after leaving her car, awed by her audacity - she’d decide if it was courage later: right now her brain moved towards stupidity - and feeling incredibly clumsy, her fingers fumbling with the clasps, by the sheer *knowing* of it all. That she may actually have to use it. By definition alone that made her…

*I’m an archer. I can’t believe I’m actually an archer.*

*I can’t believe I’m actually considering this.* She practically tiptoed forwards. *I-I mean this all could be for nothing.* “Felicity Smoak over-reacted. It could happen.” Her insides cringed. She sounded like a child. A scared child.”Oh, I wasn’t built for this.”

She remained as quiet as her pumps would allow her to be, her arms grazing the tall leafy things about her person, *I may be smart but I’m not a plant encyclopaedia.* She couldn’t see anyone. Or hear a soul. *They might not even be here, they might be fine…*

…Might be. Possibly.

There was a breach up ahead where the dirt path intersected with the greenery again. Blonde pieces covered her vision so she brushed back the fallen pieces of her hair behind her ear. This also wasn’t exactly the time to visit a mirror. Moving forwards she could see the pathetic excuse for a road now. Her hand reached for a collection of leaves and branches that pronged out from the thick coverage, blocking her path. They might not even be-

-Light hit her in the face and she recoiled, stumbling backwards and cringing as twigs cracked under foot. It was artificial… the light from a car?*

“…*You psychopath.*”

She stopped breathing, stiffening…*Oliver?*  

*“Shado… Shado wasn’t yours!”*  

Oh God… Anxiety shot up her spine, eyes searching about her and she was already leaning forwards carefully, her sense of self-preservation – where had it vanished in the first place - kicking in at the last moment, to see around the bush-thingy.

And what she saw made her want to cry.

He had them. Moira, Thea and…

Oliver. He was on his *knees.*

*No.* She almost dropped the crossbow in the urge to cover her mouth but she held on tight; a silent scream forced back down her gullet.
Why do I always have to be right?

_He had them all_ on their knees, tied with rope and tethered to each other through fear. And there he was, _Slade Wilson_, stalking about them like an overlarge crow and at least ten different kinds of frightening. Against the car light he stood dark before them and she managed to glimpse Oliver again as Slade moved. He looked the most incapacitated: she had a clear shot of the blood on his forehead, black rope around his torso (Slade obviously hadn’t taken any chances) as he half knelt but attempted to sit/stand and she felt actual pain in her chest when he failed.

His body wobbled, fighting with its current in-equal centre of gravity before falling, stumbling on his side. Always fighting. But his eyes…

Oliver’s eyes were screaming. Horrified. His voice harsh and full of pain like he knew what was coming.

“That’s _not_ what happened!” The words seem to claw their way out of his mouth.

Slade moved forwards into his space, past Moira who, though Felicity could only see the back off, appeared to be shaking. Like Thea, who was crying. “_It is_ what happened! _It is_!” He was blocking her view of Oliver. She could _hear_ the spit fly past his lips in his vehemence. “_She_ told me.” And then he pointed behind him.

To nothing.

_What_? She couldn’t help the puzzled frown that broke over her horrified expression. He was delusional now? Was this the Mirakuru or was he simply _that_ far gone? She moved closer, silently, listening.

Oliver’s words echoed her thoughts. “What do you mean; ‘she’.” He sounded desperate and confused and pushed. To. The. Limit. Slade just moved away from him again, as if entranced by the woman only he could see and Oliver seemed to crack for a moment. “_THERE’S NOBODY THERE_!”

She saw him again. Angry and pale and despairing and _terrified_. All she could do was stare and the second stretched out into eternity until…

“…You were on the island. With Oliver.”

_Moira_. The sheer awfulness of the idea that Oliver had been with this psychopath, alone, for who knows how long shone through the older woman’s voice. Shame, the guilt and all the horror Oliver continuously revealed without fail at every mention of his time on the island flashed through his features. At his mother’s words… he couldn’t even look at her.

It was _that_ that made Felicity remember she had a plan. Because she would die again and again rather than see Oliver’s disgust for himself for being a human. For doing what he _had_ to do. For surviving. For making it home. For going back to Starling. _For meeting me._

“I thought I had known true despair, until I met your son.”

Hearing his family choke on their breaths and tears had Felicity frantically reaching inside her fleece for her mobile she felt bile rise in her stomach. _Don’t you dare Moira. Don’t you dare be looking at him like that_ - Her fingers working over the touchscreen - _with any kind of suspicion or disbelief or wonder at the man he’d had to be. Don’t believe Slade for a second. You’ll kill your son if you do._
Slade continued to speak, painting his canvas of perverted justice. “I trusted him to make the right choice.”

Felicity’s finger hovered over the call button but she waited, the timing needs to be perfect – I’ll only get one shot at this, her hand shook but she waited.

“Then let me make the right choice now.” Biting her lip, unaware it was bleeding, her eyes widened and her head shook slowly from side to side. Oliver’s ragged breaths were hurting her. “Kill me.”

No! A whimper left Felicity involuntarily but successive shouts from Thea and Moira covered it.

“No!”

“No!”

But Oliver didn’t listen. Those beautiful blue eyes staring at Slade pleading, please, and getting nowhere. “Choose me! Please!”

“I am killing you Oliver. Only more slowly than you’d like.”

Even from where she stood she could see Oliver had started to cry –oh god- could hear it in his voice. “…Don’t.”

I can’t...

“Choose.”

Her heart was racing, pounding, everything in her view tipping sideways, but she couldn’t do anything yet. His gun was pointed at the back of Thea’s head. One small mistake, one itchy trigger finger and… he needed to move. Move.

Channel Dig. My inner Sara. Who should be here...

“NO! NO! …Mom?”

Felicity blinked, aware she’d passed through a minor anxiety attack and stilled, stunned as Moira began to stand.

Thea wailed, “Mom, what are you doing?!”

And Slade’s gun moved… towards Moira who was on her feet… but nowhere near as high… nowhere near…

Oliver was crying, shouting. Shaking. Staring in disbelief and anguish as she stood to die.

And that was all it took really to bring Felicity out of hiding. No thought of how stupid this was, no idea of how strong and fast and brilliant Slade was allowed more than basic awareness. Please let this work.

Slade let the pistol drop, moving closer to Moira. “You possess true-”

-Felicity’s finger pressed down on the touchscreen and almost immediately Thea’s phone began to sing.

Slade’s head whipped in Thea’s direction.
Felicity moved, already passing the bush, and the car from where the lights had shone, striding with a confidence that wasn’t hers, the crossbow aiming directly at Slade’s neck.

Everything slowed to a crawl.

Her brilliant pumps didn’t make a sound and she saw everything clearly: Thea’s slumped back, her hair framing her face as she faced forwards, Moira’s look of pure shock as the woman stared at the sight of Felicity Smoak, there with them, carrying a crossbow and, just for a moment, what astonishment looked like in Oliver Queen’s eyes.

In front of Slade who’d paused briefly to frown at Thea’s pocket, Oliver’s stare fixed gapingly at her. His body bowed forwards in his struggle with gravity – probably hurt a rib, she’d check later – he had his head directed at her, his lips slightly parted as he gasped for breath, for reprieve from this nightmare and it was all fuel for Felicity’s sliding tunnel vision. But before she took true aim her peripheral glimpsed blue and she couldn’t not look at him. Deep, deep eyes were already wide with the situation but the emotion in them was so honest and extensive, filled with disbelief and … a different kind of terror.

His mouth moved -

_Felicity…_

_No, no what are you doing?_

_What are you doing here?_

Get away. Get away from him, from this.

But she couldn’t feel it. Not right now. Not as Slade whirled around, sensing her presence and seeing Oliver’s expression, hearing as the man’s lips whispered that plea.

She saw the eye patch, his other eye narrowing in confusion, heard the click of the automatic in his grasp, his arm coming up-

The first bolt flew straight into his neck.

He looked absolutely dumbfounded. And he wasn't alone in that, _I Did I really just_- He didn't make a sound. Moira actually screamed which had Thea scrambling as far away from the man as she could possibly get. _Good._

“Thea, get behind me!” Oliver yelled and though she couldn’t look at him again, suddenly it was an Arrow mission. Except this time Felicity was on point.

The jolt of the arrow and the surprise of the attack had Slade staggering sideways. Which was really awesome as the gun went off a single second after she’d fired.

She felt the bullet whiz past her face.

“FELICITY!”

_Oliver…_ Fright launched up her spine and she dropped the crossbow but started to run anyway. At Slade. Right into his path, her fingers scrambling for purchase on the other venom filled bolt in her pocket - always carry spares – she didn’t even have time to spare a thought for how insane this was though Oliver was making up for it with his shouts that couldn’t be heard over the pounding of her heartbeat because then she was _there_, slipping beneath his shaking arm and slamming the bolt
home beneath the first one. It had taken two before and two with Roy. She felt the arrow penetrate his skin, liquid warmth spitting across her knuckles and yelped when he snarled in her face. But then his eyes drooped and she began to feel the smallest amount of relief-

His free arm hit fast and hard across her right cheek.

_Oh, ouch._ She flew backwards, body spinning around in flight so that when she landed it was face first, grimacing. She felt like her eye was going to explode.

“Felicity! Felicity, talk to me!”

Suddenly she realised her back was to Slade and twisted round to look at him. He was already on the ground, face up, eyes closed.

“I… I can’t believe it worked.” Her whisper was wobbly, shaky.

“Felicity, I swear to God, LOOK AT ME!”

She jumped where she lay, eyes shooting towards her hero and felt herself take in two giant breaths.

He was staring at her; scared and upset and relieved. His eyes had that pull to them again, the one she felt from time to time that she allowed herself to be dragged into, like they were anywhere else but here. And they both stayed there. Looking at each other. Breathing and looking at each other. It took him a moment to speak and when he did his voice was terribly unsteady. “…Are you okay?”

She just nodded. “I am so done with being brave right now.”

He started to shake his head, unable to find the humour amongst the general despair and anguish he’d been feeling. “What… what the hell are you doing here?!” His voice cracked.

Her eyes said everything to him and his closed briefly before again, fixing her with that far too penetrating stare. She had no idea what he was trying to say to her.

Thea, who had been gazing at Slade’s fallen form, turned to look at her. “You rang my phone?”

“She couldn’t think of anything else.”

In another display of character so uncharacteristic of her, Moira let out a disbelieving, nervous, speechless and broken laugh. Tears followed them.

She pushed upwards, felt herself moving much faster than normal and realised she still under the influence of a massive adrenaline rush. As Moira was closest she approached her first, taking out the last of her spare bolts and using them to cut at the bonds wrapped around the woman’s wrists. Her hands were shaking. All the while Ms Queen watched her daughter and son, something close to wonder in her gaze. By the time her rope was cut Thea was standing, moving towards her mother, desperate for contact and pushing into her personal space so that her mother could wrap her arms around her.

Felicity felt like she was intruding and deciding she’d get to Thea’s bonds later, went instead to Oliver who still hadn’t moved.

When she turned towards him she caught blue eyes watching her and hers flickered away and down, towards his middle where the black rope was double twisted. She lowered herself in front of him and reached for it-
“Felicity.”

His voice killed her.

The way he said her name, like it was a whole sentence or a paragraph wasn’t new to her. She’d gotten used to it, even though it wasn’t exactly fair of him to use it like that, like a weapon on her soul. How it changed her each time he did it.

But his tone spoke a whole new language. And it rocked her to the core.

Like he needed to feel her name, like a physical touch. To grasp onto something tangible and hold it close. But his arms were pinned. Her eyes finally sought his and she felt water gather behind them.

He looked *wrecked.* Anger, pain, disbelief, shock, *love,* need, weariness and it was all aimed. At Her.

*Frack.*
Okay so different pov here. I enjoyed writing this and chapter 3 allowed me a moment to explore 'feelings'. Things start to escalate after this though; yes there's more to come. I estimate, all in all, that there'll be eight chapters all in all. Yay. PLEASE LEAVE COMMENTS. I'm wondering whether I did Oliver any justice here.

My name is Oliver Queen. After five years on a hellish island, I have come home with only one goal: to save my city. But to do so, I can't be the killer I once was. To honour my friend's memory, I must be someone else. I must be something else.

I meant every word…

Those words have so small a weight to them now.

But he knew the moment he opened his eyes to the sight of his mother and sister on their knees before him that he was going to die.

…Because Slade was going to kill them. And in so doing kill any and all hope left inside Oliver’s malnourished soul. There’d never been much there to begin with.

The first face he saw was his mother’s. Crying and saying his name, like she couldn’t say it enough. Like she knew too. And behind her Slade was mobile, moving slowly, almost bipedal. Taking his time. He was in no rush. He was in complete control. Which meant there was no chance at all of being found in time.

Of course there wasn’t. Not with Slade.

It’s over.

He’d thought it: he didn’t deny it. The past five years had been leading to this moment. And Oliver literally couldn’t find the strength to stand. With his injuries, whatever they were after the collision and the downward spiral of this hell he’d invited into his life and his family’s by existing the way he did, every move was agony.

And none of it mattered.

You can beat me. Chain me. You can maim and defile all that I am. But please… god don’t hurt the people that I love.

There weren’t many left.

But Slade hadn’t listened, hadn’t considered, and Oliver hadn’t expected him to. But in his darkest moments even a man like Oliver Queen who believed he deserved no contentment, no reward still fought, still tried to believe in happy endings. Even if he felt the furthest thing away from a deserving soul as one could get. He still tried-

Felicity would. She would make me.
His chest felt like it was on fire: tight and paralysed with the knowing. It wasn’t working. His pleas as he tried to tap into whatever brotherly affection Slade once had for him and found nothing but a broken darkness that could never be washed, that would never fade away.

He was going to kill them. Thea, who he couldn’t live in the world without. Mom… who despite all of her flaws loved him. Unconditionally. It was a rare pleasure he hadn’t allowed himself to indulge in. And now never could again.

Slade wanted him to choose between them.

How could he?

It was an impossible choice, Slade knew this. It was how Slade believed Oliver was culpable. Because his past comrade and present nemesis also knew that he himself was the bad guy too. And bad guys didn’t deserve to love. And to be loved. No matter what the situation. Slade lost the woman he adored.

He knew that Oliver wasn’t in love with Sara.

It was why he hadn’t taken her when they all knew he could have. Easily. Trained by assassins or not. The nightmares that this knowledge had given Oliver had almost made him push the woman away. Except this time she had left him. Her own darkness constantly pushing through to reduce Oliver to the past. It was the first time that Oliver had seen, briefly what others had seen.

What Felicity had seen.

Not a light exactly, more of a principle. A guiding distinction that had begun to separate him from the killers and monsters that roamed Starling. She had seen a hero. And he’d wanted to as well, so very badly. As much as he disagreed with her idea he’d wanted to become this noble example. To earn it. And he’d tried so hard. And as much as he wanted to deny it… Sara’s guiding principal thwarted this. It was why he’d let her go. Because he saw in her what he’d been before John Diggle. Before Felicity Smoak. Before ‘I never let a brother go out alone’ and before ‘if you’re not leaving, I’m not leaving’.

Before ‘you are not alone man’. Before ‘you’re a hero’. Before ‘do whatever it takes’ and ‘yes, you can’.

He didn’t want to return to being that man. So he’d let Sara walk away from him, though it meant being alone again. Something he’d tried hard to avoid this past year. It was almost a fate worse than death. Being completely isolated. But that was what Slade was offering.

“…No. Don’t” Please.

The gun swept from mother to sister and back again.

And then his mother had stood to take his punishment, to make the choice for him, taking his crimes onto herself. In a way she was both saving him and damning him; locking him into an eternal struggle of self-disgust and honour. There was nothing he could do and he’d tried. The rope at his waist and triple tied around his wrists left him vulnerable but the heavy ache at his side that spoke of bruised ribs and torn muscles, the possible concussion to his forehead and the swelling in his knee made it impossible for him the kneel, never mind stand. But he would have. He would have kneeled. And begged. Cried. Offered his soul, anything to save them.

He allowed himself a brief moment to dream at how he could; all the different ways he could stop Slade, defeat Slade, kill Slade. It all just made him see into his own weakness.
It’s all my fault.

Why had he let this man live?

“Mom? Mom, what are you doing?”

He could have shot him in the head before now, Mirakuru can’t save a man from everything. Why hadn’t he made damn sure that he’d killed him on that boat? Why did any of this have to happen?

It’s all my fault. I did this. I did it. I have no one to blame but myself. But my family never deserved to-

For Felicity to suddenly appear and not Sara, not Diggle, hell, not even Roy? It was a forbidding joke. Beautiful but cruel. And stunning. Mesmerising. Impossible. Her moving out from within the greenery surrounding them caught him completely off guard.

What…

Striding forwards carefully but purposefully she blotted out the darkness…

I...

And caused a black hole of a deeper despair to take its place.

Felicity?

What is she…

Everything seemed to slow. A nightmare to reside within for evermore.

What are you doing here? She was all he could see. WHAT IN THE HELL WAS SHE DOING HERE?! No. No, no, no. No, please. You cannot be here. Not here, in this place.

It was like magic, how she looked now, how she was, how she’d appeared just as he’d begun to fall again. Like always. He’d never questioned it. It was the cruellest, blackest kind. For her to be there- it would be the final curtain on everything. But the bleak set of his thoughts had a light surrounding them, one not by his making. Her blonde hair spilling out of her loose bobble which fell slowly, like camera work, to the ground. She wore cropped pants and a sweater. His.

Her eyes, bold and so blue, were wide and aimed at Slade. She was terrified.

The crossbow in her hands made him want to scream but it got caught in his throat. It had nothing to do with Felicity holding a weapon. It had everything to do with Felicity. And her intent to use it. For him.

Not for me.

Her eyes had caught his momentarily and something inside him broke free, something unused and unspoiled and unloved. It clawed itself to the surface but didn’t force a sound from him.

The bolt slamming home in Slade’s throat felt like it had been made for Oliver. He blinked, fascinated and dreamlike, feeling it in his bones. Like breaking but in the best way. The sheer relief that spun a knot of equal tautness to the despair he’d been suffering almost had him sobbing, like his mother who screamed. She’d pulled the trigger and suddenly he was back. Like this was just another mission.
His thoughts collided together as he shouted for his sister to get behind him. *She knew how to use the crossbow.* Felicity. *She knew exactly what she was doing.* It didn’t shock him; it should have… but it didn’t.

*Her* saving *him* didn’t surprise him.

Felicity being heroic didn’t amaze him because she always had been.

But to commit an act of violence on his behalf was something he couldn’t reconcile with. He knew she hated hurting people, knew she viewed his own violent escapades with an unusual indifference that he’d once mistaken for ‘see no evil, hear no evil’ but had long since realised that her ability to compartmentalize was the key. Felicity understood that, most of the time, what was ‘right’ wasn’t ‘easy’. She was no coward.

There was a part of him that still refused to believe she was right there. He couldn’t believe she’d come for them. Bold as brass, knowing that she had to have been, to use her words, ‘all kinds of freaked out’ by the idea of using that crossbow on someone. But still she had.

…And now his mother was still breathing.

But then Slade shot at her as he stumbled. The gun was aimed right at her and his heart crashed against his chest. *No!* “FELICITY!”

Then she’d run at him. *Towards Slade.* What was in her head? What had she been thinking - and then he saw the second arrow in her grasp, wanted to protect her from the knowing this time as she sank it into Slade. Wanted just to take her and pull her into him. Keep her safe.

It was all he’d ever wanted.

When he saw Slade backhand her all bets were off. He’d jumped up, forgetting his injuries but only managed in falling sideways. His eyes, hurt and engaged followed her as she hit the ground and stayed there breathing deeply. Slade was already unconscious.

If he’d had the strength, Oliver would have chopped the monster’s hand off. But Slade was a monster of Oliver’s making. His retribution on Oliver was poetic justice. Oliver remained sitting.

“Felicity! Felicity, talk to me!”

Like she did at night. When he was scouting and hunting crime. That peace of mind; that he wasn’t all by himself.

“I… I can’t believe it worked.” Her voice had shook, had sounded so small but he’d heard the words clearly.

“Felicity, I swear to God, LOOK AT ME!”

He just needed her to see him.

She jumped at his uncharacteristic shout and stared at him, breathing deeply. It was almost hypnotic; the rise and fall of her chest and the need for comfort, for reassurance had his own heart blindly following the rhythm. Though Slade had hit her she was alright. His mother and sister was alright. He was… well he getting to that place. For now the relief he felt was so powerful and he couldn’t stop looking at Felicity, his partner and friend, who’d personally come to save them all.

She was… implausible. Remarkable no longer covered all that she was, is.
He took in her features, absent of make-up, and felt warm and afraid and strong and fragile all at once and it frightened him. Though he couldn’t see his sister at his back he could feel her crying, silently, in relief and shock. He leaned back against her side offering what little he could as he took whatever stability Felicity’s presence was offering back to him.

When he spoke he didn’t sound like himself at all. “…Are you okay?”

“I am so done with being brave right now.”

He just couldn’t… there was nothing good here. How could she even… Shaking his head, the despair and anguish he’d been feeling overtook him in a way. “What… what the hell are you doing here?!”

And Felicity only looked at him.

What that made him feel made his eyes slam shut, made him shake, gave him the choice to rest and sleep.

Love. It asked nothing in return.

Oh… so that’s what that feels like.

He opened his eyes again and just took her in. All of her.

Thank you. She was in his head and in his heart. Imprinted on the back of his eyelids. He’d literally never be able to close his eyes again without seeing… her. Just her. A reminder.

But he could have easily lost her too just now, along with his mother and sister.

She freed his mother of her shackles and decided to forego Thea’s seeing as how his sister had run straight into her mother’s arms, to hide from the world for just a short while. Oliver knew that urge very well. He felt it now as Felicity came to him. He hadn’t moved, had only watched her progress. There were too many emotions and words and things swimming inside for him to speak right away.

When she caught him her eyes flickered away, reaching towards his torso where the black rope was tied expertly. Her yoga pants brushed that soft place between her knees and calves and he saw dirt there, encased against her skin where’d she’d fallen. Her right cheek was inflamed.

“Felicity.”

He saw her sharp intake of breath and didn’t care how he sounded. He’d always liked saying her name. Four syllables. A mixture of middle-English, Anglo-French and Latin. Meaning ‘happiness’.

It stroked off his tongue.

He needed her to look at him. To say something. So that he could tell her how stupid she’d been. How she could have died, how he wasn’t worth it, how she’d scared him to death. He needed her to cut him loose so that he could… do something… and thank her. He’d never tried with her before. To touch her, hug her. He touched her all the time; there’d never been any effort involved. She’d hugged him but he’d never initiated it. It had always felt too… intimate an act. He was fond of Felicity but if he could ever be truly honest with himself he’d admit that his affection was… different.

Much different from what he was used to. It wasn’t the same as how he felt about anyone else.
With his mother the love was eternal. Now that they were making their way back to each other he could feel their bond strengthen. Thea… what was there to say? She was his baby sister and he’d cherished each and every moment with her. It had been easy playing the fool with Tommy but when his true self had been revealed, the relaxed back slaps and hugs turned awkward, strained. And Diggle was the truest friend and partner, his loyal comrade who he knew would forever have his back. With Roy he’d seen the chance for redemption for both himself and the young man who had been so eager to join their vigilante quest.

His connection with Sara, his love and idealism for Laurel, his brief ‘use and abuse’ tryst with Isabel, his need for companionship with McKenna, his attraction and deep yearning for an open relationship with Helena, the comfort he’d shared with Shado (he wasn’t ready to re-live his happenings in Russia)…

Felicity gave him the space to be himself. Because he always had been with her. From the beginning he hadn’t managed to put up the usual barriers and shields that his cover identity demanded of him. He’d stumbled through ‘my coffee shop is in a rough neighbourhood’. Each time he’d come to see her and ask for her assistance she’d given him a look, telling him she knew he was full of crap. And acquiesced to his requests anyway. It was a trust that just popped out of nowhere. Like they’d already known each other for years and had spilled their darkest secrets to each other.

He’d never felt the need to shadow himself from her.

It was an attractive quality.

But right now, feeling the low throb of relief and quiet horror at living through this trauma, she was an island he desperately wanted to grasp onto. How had she known they’d be there? Her computers in the Foundry? Why hadn’t she brought Dig with her? How could she even be here? Why did she have the right to look so beautiful… and full of light… and completely untainted when he was all but crucified by the spectres of his past? It wrecked him and stabilised him all at once. And he wondered if she would allow him to…

It was a ridiculous thought and he felt ashamed by how tempted he was to just sink into her, to breathe her in deeply, to maybe nourish himself with some light for a change. But it was still there, that feeling. And so was she.

Looking so hesitant, the concern in her eyes rocked him but he hadn’t been able to look away from her. “Is it alright if I untie you?” The space between his brows creased. As if he’d say no… So stupid.

He wondered how he looked to her then. His set jaw line, the strained scope of his eyes, his lips thinned from the stress of it all. He was angry. Understandable, but…

Her fingers reached for him, brushing so lightly against his chest he was surprised that he actually felt it through his clothes. But he did. And he must have still been affected by adrenaline because it felt like a live wire touching an open socket. His muscles jumped.

He’d never felt so vulnerable. Like the smallest touch would cause him to shatter.

I started today in bed with Sara, content to just lie there for a while and dream about what would never happen, even though I lied to myself that it could. Then Roy had woken and everything changed. Sara left, showing a side of herself to me I couldn’t accept. I told her we could work on it but we both knew I was kidding myself.
I just didn’t want to be alone again.

I get in the car with my mom and Thea and my world tumbles sideways, threatens to turn to ashes.

And then Felicity saves my life and I’m too injured, too tired, too weak and too bound to ground by Slade’s skill with rope to move.

If Slade had seen just how much she—

His responding shudder was violent and it made the woman in question look up from the rope she’d almost completely cut him free from. He felt her eyes flickering over him but his were still laser focused on hers. “You’re cold. I-I almost done” She hurried to finish with gusto.

The words just started.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

“What?” She didn’t look up again, too busy concentrating.

He must have looked a sight; he’d been crying and now he was angry, cold and tired. The muscles in his neck rigid, his cheeks tight. “You. Shouldn’t. Have. Come.” The glare wasn’t intentional but he was feeling so much and she just defied every rule in existence.

The rough quality to his tone made her pause, as if she sensed the danger and finally looked at him again. The knot of anxiety in his chest shot up for some reason and breathing became increasingly difficult. “I…” She began, shaking her head. “I know, but I couldn’t just sit there! And now the situation is- I mean, if there was even the slightest chance-”

Anger and worry forced him into her personal space. “What if it hadn’t worked Felicity?!” He really couldn’t help the way he sounded. As if he were breaking.

She didn’t lean away from him. “It did work!”

“But what if it HADN’T?!”

“Then I’d be dead!” She yelled in his face and the words stopped him cold. “And so would you! And your sister and your mother!” Not necessarily… “And Dig would have been crushed! But I’m not and you aren’t and everything is fine!” Amazed and in pain his wide eyed gaze hadn’t left her. His mouth was open, taking in shallow breaths. She’d silenced him. Then I’d be dead! She couldn’t just say that-And so would you! How could he have lived with himself if… “You would have died anyway! I was not going to let that happen!” Her voice thickened with tears and he swallowed. “You’re my friend Oliver. My partner.” It was whispered, like a prayer.

“I’d bet my life on my partner.”

And that was it. That was all he could take. His chest felt like it was about to explode.

The bonds surrounding him fell to the ground when she finished and he fell forwards, hands bracing against the ground. He couldn’t feel the relief of being set free, not yet. “Whoa, easy.” He felt her hands on his shoulders, prepared to help lift him if he needed it. Her proximity just made it easier for him.

He grimaced at the flare of pain down his side but pushed upwards regardless and moved. He really needed to.
Knees, strong against the ground, very much ignoring the pain in his right leg, he slid into her, into her arms that were so much stronger than they appeared. Desperate for her to be against him, to feel her living, breathing form against his and remind him that they were alright, that they were alive was too strong a compulsion to deny. He couldn’t be steady or tender. His left arm quickly found its way under the one she’d used to grab onto his shoulder, the shaking fingers of his hand grasping the back of her neck before winding into her hair and clutching the strands like a lifeline. He closed his eyes and pressed his face into her neck, breathing in.

“Oliver?” Her voice soft and concerned.

He understood. He’d never done this before.

His other arm circled quickly around her back, covering the entirety of her waistline and pressing her other arm into his chest, beneath his suit coat. He tightened his grip, pulling her close as he was able, feeling every inch of her and the pain in his chest burst into flame. He gasped, feeling his breath hot against her skin, the pure relief and undeniably closeness consuming him for a moment. And then the frustrated terror, the anxiety, the sick feeling of worthlessness… one by one they melted away. As if she were sucking out all the crap.

His muscles relaxed, his breathing levelled out... And he heard her whisper.

“…Oh.”

Eyes still closed, nose brushing against the softest of skin at her throat he exhaled. “It’s been a really bad day.” His voice broke at the end and he felt tears breach his tear ducts before he could stop them. His fingers clased like iron bars onto her, scrunching up his face in attempt to not let them show. Or be felt.

He failed.

And found he didn’t feel mortified. Or ashamed.

…Her fingers reached the skin of his neck and stroked the hair there, her touch soothing and gentle, making him shiver and relax. He felt rather than saw her smile. “Understatement.” She said; disbelief and wry humour colouring her tone. She sounded like she was on the verge of tears herself. “It’s okay.” She sniffed and he felt her other arm move underneath his jacket… and slowly tread her hand in circles at the small of his back, pressing him further into her as if she’d sense his need for contact. It was warming. Necessary. “It’s over now. You’re safe.”

Hey, shh, shh... it's alright. You’re safe.

Oh, you were shot.

It's nothing.

Instinctively they both began to rock together, side to side. Slowly. Only slightly. It was so God damn comforting. Like pure sun light. It took him several minutes of this comfort, this healing for his throat to form the right words.

“Thank you. Thank you Felicity.”

This time it was Felicity that sounded unraveled and he barely caught her words. “You’re very welcome.”

It had been a long day for her too.
There’s a line in this chapter that comes from a much beloved TV show... see if you can catch it.

Part 4

“Oh…” Wow.

It was all she could think as he pressed against her.

What stunned her is that she’d been his first choice.

Well, that wasn’t necessarily true. I mean, Moira and Thea are too wrapped around each other for a third body. I’m sure I was just the closest source of heat. Because he was cold. And I’m... not... cold. And wearing his sweater. And I need to quick thinking these things. Right now. 3, 2, 1…

He’d never held onto her like this before. She didn’t think anyone had. But this was Oliver Queen. He didn’t hug people, or at least he didn’t hug her. Not like this. Though she knew what it was like to be in his presence, to have a solitary arm wrapped around her waist (because his other was always holding his bow) from the brief hug she’d forced on him when he’d returned from taking on Cyrus Gold… But this was a very different kind of feeling.

For a brief moment her nerves and senses went haywire. She could feel his biceps. Triceps, quadriceps – how many ‘ceps’ are there anyway because he has them ALL, no exceptions – with how tightly he’d gathered her too him. Against her arms, her back and shoulders. His pectorals, or what she preferred to call them, ‘chest-pecs of supreme deliciously moulded awesomeness’? Were pressed, hard, against her breasts. Um, yep. Images were conjured, she would not deny this. Steady girl. And she’d watched the man work out, so yep. She knew very well what he looked like underneath his suit clothes, that he was very strong, that he was a lot bigger than her… she just never expected to be on the receiving end of one of his displays of affection. To have him wrapped around her so completely. They were normally reserved for Laurel, or Thea. Or Sara.

So extremely aware right now…

And he’d been shaking. But he still held her, fiercely, with his face pressed into her neck, and every time he shifted she felt the ridge of his nose against the column of her throat. Oh, boy. As if holding her too gently would allow her to slip away. I swear I could feel his heartbeat. Even through his shirt plus jacket and suspenders. And I just had to think of his suspenders. Now is so not the right time to be thinking about Oliver Queen in suspenders or having any of these thoughts! Save them till later, you know, when he’s not around…

He’d shook in relief. And then he spoke, mumbling into the place between her neck and shoulders.

“It’s been a really bad day.”

It hurt. His uneven tone cracking at the end, breaking into a mere whisper hurt. But the words were just so right for the moment, for him, that she also had to smile an, albeit, wobbly smile.
Then she felt the wetness on her throat. *Oh, Oliver.* His lashes brushed against her, she could feel his fingers digging into her side, grasping and releasing the material there as if reaching for a steady buoy amidst his all the chaos. He pressed his face further into her neck.

Swallowing she spoke, moving her arms around him so naturally she wondered at the feeling of it. And she did what she’d always wanted to during all those times in the lair when he’d looked so down hearted, so tired and so alone. Her fingers slowly, soothingly stroked through the hair at the base of his skull.

“Understatement.” The word made water fill her eyes. “It’s okay.” She sniffed them away.

It was so comforting to feel him like this. It hadn’t hit her just how scared she’d been until he’d held her. Her other arm snuck beneath his suit jacket to rub at the small of his back. She knew what she liked to feel when someone hugged her; maybe he’d like the same. It brought them as close as they could get to one another.

“It’s over now. You’re safe.” She muttered, because he definitely hadn’t been.

It took a moment for those words to sink for her to realise the parallel.

*Hey, shh, shh, shh, you’re safe.*

*Oh, you were shot-*

-**Hey.**

*It’s nothing.*

Tempus Fugit indeed.

She could feel her thighs against his as they simultaneously rocked together from side to side.

“*Thank you.*” His voice, hoarse but gentle and so very indebted had her pressing her lips together, the tears forming once again. “Thank you Felicity.” And she shivered at the very expressive way he said her name.

The dirt beneath her knees was cold but he was so warm and she’d been so scared to come here. But she was thankful she had. “You’re very welcome.” She’d saved him for a change. The thought made her smile to herself, a little proud. *So that’s what it feels like. I like it. Though not the whole ‘I’m too scared to contemplate loosing that I’ll just go in without a plan and hope I don’t get killed’ thing. Rather avoid that again. At all costs.*

It wasn’t until a rich voice, one that oozed upper class society - as if you could sell it in silver spoon bottles - broke through her mental wanderlust that Felicity remembered…

“Oliver.”

*Moira.* And Thea. Who were both standing right there… *Ah.*

His name said so suddenly in the quiet surrounding them had him jolting against her, like it shocked him.

Moment over.

His muscles tensed and shifted under her hands and she felt him lift his head, his arm leaving what felt like the whole of her back as the path of his other made her want to moan out loud. It slowly
left her hair, but not her skin, absently stroking all the way down her neck - it had never felt so long before – before dipping down the scope, landing just under her chin. It didn’t move. Oh... just... Brillo.

His face came into view as he pulled back from her; his eyes, the white of which were reddened were locked behind her on his mother. Felicity didn’t move, suddenly tired and wary of his family’s reaction to everything.


He looked stronger.

More like himself; the way he was before heading out on a mission to save the Glades. She felt herself take in a large breath.

He looked more than anything, his face was all edges as it slowly regained its usual severity, like he just wanted to hold them in his arms like he had her but instead remained kneeling. Eventually his gaze shifted back to her. He smiled. It was small and raw but very much the same smile he’d used earlier, after their talk about Sara, only filled with so much more. It was soft and it turned her knees to jelly. She watched him take a deep breath. Then his eyes dropped down.

“You’re wearing my hoodie.”

Er, what? She blinked at him. That’s what he chooses to say first?

“You’re usually more loquacious than this.” He seemed to deliberate her, arching a brow.

“Ah, I-I...”

His head actually tilted sideways, frowning, then shaking it as if she deified logic, as if he just couldn’t believe it. “And you’re blushing.”

A-buh-uh? “It was the first thing available!” Came out at bullet speed. They were sitting on the ground, after having a very close call with Slade Wilson, ex-Special Ops-Mirakuru enhanced killing machine and he was just smiling at her, this sweet little smile which, merged in with the rich quietness of his very masculine voice and the warm amusement in his eyes, was just a little too much for her to cope with suddenly.

…But there was something deadly deep inside those blue irises. He wasn’t done with the night; not at all.

He nodded an ‘oh okay’ and she shifted, nudging her glasses with the tips of her fingers like she did whenever she was nervous or unsure. A move that she knew that he knew all too well.

The hand at her neck lifted then, his fingers nudging against the underside of her chin, pushing her face sideways, exposing her right cheek. She felt his gaze fix on her most definitely swollen cheek and reached up to grasp his wrist, tenderly pulling his hand away.

“I’m alright too.” She said quietly. Well, actually it hurts like a bitch but-

The tip of his index finger trailed underneath the area. He didn’t reply, just looked at her again before moving to stand and, even though he was injured, pulling up a blinking Felicity with him in one smooth motion.
Sometimes she still forgot how resilient this man was.

And then all manner of his earlier amusement left him, replaced by *hardness*. There was a bone-tired air about him and the look in his eyes was one of pure remorse but also of love. It was aimed at the two women huddled together before him.

Slowly he exhaled… Waiting.

Moira had her lips pressed together, as if to negate her tears. “Oliver.” She uttered again, shaking her head and giving him a watery smile. Then she was rushing forwards in tandem with Thea who reached him first. The three collided together in a heap of relieved groans and sorrowful gasps, hugging the crap out of each other. Felicity stepped to the side, giving them some room, hearing Oliver murmur with his face in Thea’s hair. “It’s alright. You’re okay.”

Moira pulled far enough away from him to see his face. “We’re okay.”

He nodded, “Yeah,” hugging her again until he realised the death grip Thea had on his jacket. He frowned, turning his head, concerned. “Thea? Are you alright?” Dislocating from his mother his hands touched his sister’s face and arms, searching for injuries, his powerful eyes flickering here and there. “Did he hurt you?”

Said brunette shook her head before burrowing into his open jacket. Instinctively his arms wrapped around her, rubbing his hands over her back as Moira petted her hair. She’s shivering, Felicity noticed, she’s probably freezing. “Just cold.” The girl confirmed. “And, you know, my hands are tied: I literally can’t hug anything but your jacket right now.”

*Oh… “Oh!”*

In unison they turned to look at her. Her eyes fell on one probing stare. *Moira.*

It wasn’t that she was bothered that the mother in question never remembered her name and most people couldn’t keep up with her rambling anyway - though it seemed like her trio of Arrow buddies didn’t seem to mind too much, she hoped. Fingers crossed. But Moira had the unfailing ability to make Felicity feel, with a single look, like a worm or a particularly annoying/offensive and unwelcome bug; one that was easily disposed of. One that threatened their sculptured world.

Like right now how the woman looked her over inquisitively, relief still echoing in her features but the most powerful emotion, the one that caused her brow line to crinkle and her eyes to narrow, was suspicion. And normally Felicity would completely admit to that being a justifiable response but she didn’t feel particularly inclined to do so just now.

Her fingers still had blood on them. Literally. She needed a shower: essence of Slade was not an attractive feature.

Looking from one to the next she held up her last arrow and waved it about like a loon, smiling slightly. “Haven’t… cut her loose yet, so…” She gestured at Thea, taking slow steps forward. “I’m just going to… do that.”

Immediately Oliver extricated himself from his sister but Thea, she noticed, was now staring at Slade’s unconscious form. *Okay.* She moved to intercept her line of sight, *hi there,* stepping in front of his body.

It took a moment but eventually hazel eyes popped up to her face, meeting her look.

With everything that had happened there was no way she could start cutting the girl’s bonds with
anything sharp until she had her full attention.

Nodding to herself she began to pull and swipe at the black ropes of pure persistent annoyance… and didn’t stop when she both felt and glimpsed Oliver in her peripheral step back from his mother who’d been holding onto his hand like a life line.

“Oliver?” The woman muttered.

He hobbled out of the circle, bending down just a couple of steps away to pick up… pick up Slade’s fallen pistol.

Straightening he checked the magazine of the sleek blackness, looking down at it as his hands moulded around the barrel and the hilt… then his thumb pushed down on the hammer.

The sound seemed to run right through Thea who jumped a little, trembling, Moira swallowing and opening her mouth once, twice before closing it, enfolding her middle with her arms. She watched her son as he breathed long and deep, eyes travelling from the weapon to sliding over the ground as if following a path only he could see. And he looked at her briefly too before passing her entirely to watch Felicity…

Who hadn’t moved. Hadn’t flinched. Hadn’t reacted. Wasn’t even watching him back now, seeing him as Moira and Thea did: like a firework about to explode. Like she was used to it, which she was, let’s be fair.

Momentarily Felicity’s eyes did flicker upwards, just once. There was nothing to be said.

Dark, his eyes didn’t stray. He simply waited for her to finish.

Right this moment Felicity was more than a little worried about the faintly zoned-out expression on Thea’s face. Shock? She’d seemed fine earlier though Felicity knew it could sometimes take a while to fully kick in. “Thea?” She spoke, blonde strands falling into her eyes having realised during the hug that her bobble must have fallen out somewhere. “Are you alright?”

Surprising her, the girl immediately answered. “I… I don’t know yet.”

“That’s very understandable.” She said, focusing on getting that last knot undone. “If it were me I’d be-”

“-How’d you know where to find us?” Thea questioned suddenly, scrutinizing Felicity with a frown, curiosity and a lot of fear.

Silence. Felicity opened her mouth to say the first thing that popped into her head but Moira got there first, smooth as silk.

“Yes, how did you know?” She stepped closer, as if trying to protect her daughter, eyes like ice scrutinizing her every breath and Felicity almost snorted. She was the last person Moira needed to fear.

But then…

“Mom. Now isn’t the time.” Oliver. Watching his mother with that slightly confused frown he limped back to them. “We need to get out of here.” He turned to Felicity, hand automatically moving to her shoulder. “Dig?”

The reminder had her closing her eyes to nod – but then remembered, *frack*. “I’ve already left him
a billion messages…” I put my phone on silent. Quickly her cell was out of her pocket, Oliver observing her like he always did in the lair, letting her be, leaving her free to do her stuff because he knew he could never do the things she could do…

His intensity reminded her of the face he normally covered with a green hood.

Though on silent the screen of her mobile was lit up like a Christmas tree: Dig’s smiling face on view. “He’s calling!” She accepted the call, putting the device by her ear. “Dig?”

“Felicity!”

The muscles in her face hurt at the mad rush of happy relief she felt at hearing his voice but she winced when she heard down the line a squeal of what sounded like rubber tires being forced to keep their momentum as they swerved at unimaginable-speeds-per-hour. “Thank God! I’ve been calling your phone but-”

“No, I had it switched off. Couldn’t let Slade-”

“Slade?!” John sounded like he’d been punched and he whispered, ‘you were right’, before his voice elevated. “What happened? Are you alright? Is Oliver-”

She started talking. “I’m fine and Oliver’s…” Her eyes caught his, flickering down and watching the index finger and thumb of his right hand rub themselves together, his little subconscious twitch, she continued, quietly. “He’s alright. Thea and Moira are too.” Sort of…

A loud exhale sounded as momentary white noise. “I can’t leave you guys alone for an hour can I?”

A shaky laugh left her and she started fidgeting, pacing. “I’m sorry Dig; I didn’t have much of a choice.” She couldn’t stand still. Not with Oliver watching her every reaction: piecing together everything that had happened to bring her here.

“Yeah, got that: that message you left me almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Dig-”

“Felicity, I swear, if you scare a brother like that again…”

Floored at the way his voice had started shaking, but knowing she really shouldn’t be - they were family after all – had her pause, gaze softening, mouth curling into a smile, a giggle unbecoming of the situation bubbling out of her. “Love you Dig.”

A rough bark of raw emotion left the big guy. “…love you too.” He seemed to pull himself together though composure was about a million miles away. “You didn’t have much of a choice.” He reiterated. “I should never have turned off my phone.”

“Hey, come on, how were you to know that this was-”

Apparently, what little slice of peace Oliver had since she’d arrived regained had now run dry because he stepped into her space, hand closing around hers, eyes asking her a question, and she automatically let go of the cell, giving it to him and then he was gone.

“Dig? Are you on your way here?” He immediately asked, his voice low, deep, fortified – lethal – and whatever reply Diggle gave him was left a mystery as the archer stepped away, muttering low into the receptacle for, Felicity thinks, the benefit of his mother and sister. A part of her wonders
however at the logic in *not* telling them everything now. After tonight and all that had happened…

Thea’s voice pulled her back – it seemed the Queen family had a habit of pulling her both into and outside of her thought-scape on an alarmingly frequent basis.

“Felicity… Smoak?”

She blinked, turning and involuntarily doing her usual little head bob quirk. “That’s me.”

Thea’s eyes were fixed on her brother. “Are you and my brother… together?” Not seeing the ‘uh what’ look on Felicity’s face she continued. “I thought he was with Sara but-”

“-No, we are *not*- why does everyone always think that… we’re friends, co-workers!”

Her vehement denial had Thea blinking too, staring at her with raised brows. “Okay. I just thought that…” A breath of frustrated exasperation left her; hazel eyes closing briefly. “I wanted to say thank you, but I also wanted to know who I should be thanking.” At Felicity’s frown she continued, the barest trace of a genuinely innocent and grateful smile on her face. “Felicity Smoak: my brother’s EA, Felicity: my brother’s very smart and fake blonde-haired friend or *Felicity: my brother’s… more than just a friend, friend.*”

Said fake-blonde opened and closed her mouth like a dying fish. “Oh… y-you’re welcome?” It came out like a question.

“I still would like to know how you found us…” Moira, who’d been watching and listening walked over to Thea’s side, effectively blocking Felicity in between her daughter and the fallen Slade and finished. “…Miss Smoak.” Her name being said by any woman before, not even Isabel, had never sounded so threatening.

Yep; there was history here, in case you forgot.

A very hard-done-to-sound broke free from Thea. “Who cares?”

Moira turned a hard arched brow on the girl who fell into silent perplexity. “I do.”

“GPS tracker.” Felicity spoke to Moira, who’s head had whipped back to hers to so fast she thought she hard it crack before locking eyes with Thea who, seemingly falling into one emotion after the next, now looked a little shell-shocked. “I put one in your phone after Slade kidnapped you the first time.”

Slowly Moira’s mouth fell open, *both* eyebrows raised this time. *Wow, I managed to crack the most put together exterior since Helen of Troy.* Obviously that had been the last thing the older woman had expected her to say.

Thea shook her head. “W-why?”

“Because… because you getting kidnapped could happen again.” She muttered, watching Thea rub absentely over own wrists.

“So…” Thea shook her head. “You just thought you’d invade my privacy and put random tech on my phone?”

*There’s definitely no ‘random’ about it. Though put that way it does sound a little creep-some.* She was relieved to discover that Thea’s tone, though intense and serious like Oliver’s could be, wasn’t exactly angry or distrustful. It just sounded like she was trying to grasp at some tangible control.
Taking a breath she gestured at Oliver and spared him a glance that was supposed to be momentary but ended up being… not so momentary.

She’d expected to find him still talking to Dig, still ruminating on the night’s various events, still being Oliver. If he managed to hear that she was babbling…She’d expected him to look cautious, worried even, that his family could be further exposed to his secrets…

The phone was still to his ear but his attention was completely focused on her very fake blonde self. And he looked, once again… wrecked. Speechless.

There was a lilt of wonderment that was quickly fading from his features, replaced with something else, as if he’d been hit hard by some knowledge, as if he’d… heard every bit of their conversation.

His blue, blue eyes - how can eyes be that blue - were unusually bright against the car light. Piercing. Intense. The depth of them was a slow burn on her skin. How could eyes even do that, how? It isn’t possible. They pulled at her like gravity, a question there too and then it hit her as to why.

He hadn’t known about the GPS.

She’d just openly admitted to bugging his sister’s phone so that she could keep an eye on his loved one. So that he wouldn’t have to worry. So that she could spend hours during the night worrying over someone else’s sister to the point where she’d travel back to the foundry or to QC to watch over her during the early hours of the morning.

And it had saved their lives.

He looked like he wanted to…

He looked like he wanted to love her.

“You’re his sister.” Felicity finally muttered, having no strength to wrench her gaze away from him.

“Just like that?” The voice was Thea’s who sounded… not so puzzled.

“Just like that.”

“I… get it.”

So did Moira. She knew exactly how Felicity felt about her son. And judging by the expression of sheer… something she could see on Oliver’s face maybe it wasn’t all one sided. Maybe. She went unnoticed by the pair, eventually looking away and down, pressing her lips together. Humble crow was never easy to swallow.

Felicity cleared her throat, finally looking back at Thea. “He’s my boss so… Well, he was my boss,” she backtracked. “But he’s also my friend. You didn’t see him… you didn’t know what it was like when you were kidnapped.”

Thea’s eyes flickered from felicity to her brother and back again.

Then Oliver spoke, voice still low. Quiet. “Diggle’s coming.” He waited till he had her attention, before glancing at his mother. “He’ll be in here in a few minutes.”

He must be breaking the speed limit to be that close so soon, which is exactly what she’d done
so… She smiled, aiming to alleviate the atmosphere some-

Then the skin of her left shoulder blade ripped open with fire.

“No! FELICITY!”

What…?

Is that…blood?

The shock of it left her numb for several moments of where blissful ignorance and confusion reigned free and she watched, dazedly.

A flash of red streaking across her vision, those red drops against grey, splattering her neck and her sweater. Heat searing down on her back… the sight of Oliver treading way past her, pistol coming up fast and fierce in his grip. The silent noise of Thea yelling, wide eyed and frightened once again as Moira tugged her back, away from her… away from the danger behind her.

Away from Slade who she’d been standing in front of.

Away from Slade who was notorious for his ease and skill with swords and sharp weapons.

Away from Slade who was supposed to be unconscious…

**CRACK!**

The sound of the gunshot brought understanding, brought clarity. Forced logic of thought into her brain. Searing heat + freaked out Thea + gunshots from the solitary pistol now in Oliver’s possession + catalyst, ‘me’ = violent threat. Equals pain. God the pain. Suddenly was right there; inescapable. Awareness no longer optional, it forced a scream so sharp from her throat she felt it flare through her bones, the sound echoing harshly in the din of night.

*I… I can’t…*

**CRACK!**

Wh-what… I… it hurts… really hurts…

**CRACK!**

Her back throbbed and shrieked at her. Clawed madness down her spine. Surprised she hadn’t fallen over she realised, from somewhere in the background of her consciousness, that it was because if she did…Oliver would kill him. Oliver would kill Slade. And where most would believe this completely justifiable, and it was, Felicity knew that in killing Slade, Oliver would undo all the hard work of the past year. It would completely undermine his goal and though she was sure he’d be alright for a while afterwards, it would inevitably come back to haunt him… it would slowly eat at him. Destroying that little light inside him, the one she saw daily, the one with so much potential. She couldn’t let that happen.

**CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!**

*Do not hurl.* Pulling herself up she whirled around. The effort it cost her blurred her vision and she wobbled on the spot, feeling very close to vomiting. She wanted to cry, to release some of the absolute agony bestowed on her body.
But there was Oliver, close to Slade, bearing down on him with a vengeance. The expression on his face said *everything*. Deadly didn’t scratch the surface. Jawline taught, pulled tight against what she was sure were clenched teeth, he looked so… *serious* about this. Yet the opposite of detached; there was this light in his eyes, furious and blatantly hateful. Anger, pain, a wealth of sadness, that childish hurt in our inner natures that never really died where every boy and girl believed they deserved happiness yet didn’t get it, betrayal, fatigue… A sublime chaos.

Pushed to the limit. Again. His finger once again on the trigger, pulling it back, knowing that – though he was Mirakuru enhanced – even monsters couldn’t survive everything, like, say, a dozen or two bullets in all the right places.

Slade, helpless against the dirt road was bleeding and seething. Dark eyed, the depth of his irises were black and empty save his wrath. She glimpsed the glint of his sword kicked amidst the bushes, bullet wounds in his chest but not his heart. Not his head. When he coughed, he coughed blood.

And Oliver was past anybody’s words or prompts…

*But I have to try.*

“Oliver!” It wrenched from her chest straining the liquid metal on her back, coated in anxiety and affection. “OLIVER!”

His face, stark and beyond every emotion lifted to face her, *see* her. His finger loosened on the trigger.

“Don’t.” She whispered, unable to shout again. “Don’t kill him. Don’t do it.”

He began to shake his head, the tide in his eyes sparking the tell-tale tightening in her chest, the warning bell she got whenever she was about to start sobbing. “He doesn’t deserve to live for this Felicity. For any of this.” Suddenly *so* tender, his eyes trailed fingers of care over her form. “He just *hurt* you.” As if it were unimaginable. “He tried to kill my mother. My sister. I can’t let him live.”

“You’re going to have to.”

His frown was one of complete bafflement. *Why?* She could tell he wanted so much for to just give him a reason. But she couldn’t. Wouldn’t.

“He isn’t worth you destroying yourself over. He doesn’t get to have that Oliver. He doesn’t…” God, the pain in her back was actually building. “He doesn’t get to ruin you along with him.”

“What…” It came out breathless and completely broken. “What is there left to save?!” He half shouted, looking torn and hating himself for it.

Slade’s bitter, weak laugh sounded like metal shavings down a parched throat. “That’s right kid. Men like us can’t be protected from the truth.”

Oliver’s trigger finger twitched.

Every little part of his soul was open bare for her through his eyes.

The vigilante, scratching off names on a list. The hunter with his bow. The assassin with his deadly aim and those precision tactics. The killer with marked fists and hardened skin. The victim with tortured eyes and a gentle grace. The soldier with scars and a beyond the norm endurance.
The hero with his mask and his values. The man who loves his family be they blood related or not. He had, has, just as much heart and soul as she did.

She didn’t get how he couldn’t see all of that.

The furrow between her brows was deliberate but the feeling in her gaze and the tears gathering there weren’t. “You.” Always you. “You Oliver.”

He didn’t have any words; he just looked at her. Like he was seeing her for the first time.

When she tried to move closer she staggered. She saw his arm simply drop down, his body turning as if involuntarily moving to help her but he couldn’t seem to move his feet, to step out of the invisible circled he’d pencilled around him and Slade.

The man watching the pair of them, weak and bleeding as he was there was a deep reservoir of pain in his gaze too. But unlike Oliver he directed all his rage externally. The slow, savage smile that she glimpsed emerging on his face pushed her to talking again.

“Everything that has ever happened to you, everything you’ve ever had to do, on the island or before then. Or after…. None of it justifies allowing Slade Wilson or anyone else to ruin your soul. No one on the planet has the right to twist another person.” Slightly more than a whisper now, a murmur she continued to ignore Slade and looked directly into Oliver’s eyes. Holding him there with her. *Stay with me.* “To manipulate a person into becoming something they don’t deserve? Not even God has that right. Free will Oliver. Don’t let him take that from you.”

But he started shaking his head again, looking like he was about to dispute everything she’d said but ironically, given her current state of injury, she was faster than him. “Don’t say you deserve that. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. No one deserves what he has tried to do to you tonight.” She hated how she was beginning to sound, all choked up and *breaking,* but the pain was becoming almost unbearable. She was tired too.

“You know…” *This is all I can do.* “Whatever you choose…” *Kill him or don’t it doesn’t matter.* “For whatever it’s worth… I believe in you.”

*I always have.*

He didn’t move. Still didn’t say anything. If she didn’t know any better she’d think he’d been frozen. She smiled at him, for him, feeling those tears dropping fast abruptly down her cheeks, the urge to remove her glasses – she’d never really needed them anyway – was stifling. She felt so incompetent. Pathetic. Moira, wherever she was standing, wasn’t helping and Thea wouldn’t want to: who could blame her? It was just her.

“And the thing about belief Oliver? It is isn’t just for ‘right now’, or for ‘today’…” She ran out of air and inhaled a shaky breath realising that, yep, she was really crying now.

*Pleading* with him. *Please Oliver…*

“It’s forever.”

The silence following this felt deafening. And though she knew that waiting was sometimes half the war, she had no idea it could be this overwrought. *Did it work? Did I even make a dent? Did I do anything?*

Slowly, so agonizingly slowly, a change occurred in Oliver. A sound left him, one she didn’t understand, like the expansion and contraction of his vocal cords and he blinked. Once. Inhale.
Twice, exhale. Frowning to himself he licked his lips and closed his eyes. “Felicity.”

It was a mere whisper but it made her sob in relief.

His eyes opened and the determination there, the desire to ‘hope’ made her want to dance around an idiot.

But even if she could Slade had other plans. “Hey! You better kill me kid!” Blood and spittle caught against his lips. “You better kill me or the next time I’ll-” So quickly she’d had trouble following it Oliver twisted, spinning the pistol in his hand, and then bent low and cold cocked the bastard. He stood back, looking down at his once ally and friend whose eyes were now closed, body now slumped. Once again unconscious.

Which begged the question… how had he regained consciousness so fast in the first place? She pumped a more than lethal dose of venom into his system. He should have stayed down for a half hour…

All thoughts in her head ceased when Oliver turned round. In science everyone knew that blue fire burned hotter than orange. Oliver’s eyes were such a prime example of this.

And then he just started striding forwards, sure and strong. Capable. Even with the limping and the bleeding. When he reached her he didn’t pause, didn’t say a word. Very softly this time, his pistol free hand lifted to her cheek and she panicked inside when her face automatically turned into it. Needing the security. To be comforted.

But he didn’t look at all perturbed. She’d done it before after all; when shot by the Clock King. Her reaction seemed to be what he was waiting for as that same hand then caught the back of her head and pulled her into him, his broad shoulders seeming to somehow curve around her form. He took in a large inhale that expanded his chest into her cheek, his momentum causing her to move backwards and she winced, her face grimacing as more tears fell at the ripple of pain across her shoulder.

“Shh, shh, shh…” The sounds of comfort, because they certainly weren’t words, were whispered into her hair. Another first. She shivered, feeling his hot breath against the top of her ear, his cheek against the side of her head. “I’ve got you.”

Nose pressed into his shirt, beneath his collar bones she inhaled what she knew to be leather, soap, sweat, blood and wood. “You don’t have to-”

“Shh.” Pulling back slightly his gaze caught hers. “I don’t know how many times I can thank you in one night but it’ll never be enough.”

His voice was so warm and necessary she felt herself trembling, feeling like a fool for telling him not to hold her when all she really wanted was to be held. “You’ll never have to.”

Her answer seemed to floor him. His eyes flickered between hers before he smiled slightly. The hand on the back of her head lifted and she almost cried again. Needing it back there, stroking her hair. Get a grip. She inhaled, exhaled, and forced herself to just smile back at him.

And then that same hand took the front zip of her sweater and started dragging it down.

Er… so caught in the almost hypnotic movement she didn’t say a word, just watched as now open his hoodie revealed her tight black yoga top. And a good three inches of toned stomach she was secretly very proud of. He didn’t seem to have expected that because the when the on again, off
The look on his face was so open. Like he hadn’t expected it; for this to happen, here of all places. His eyes, his expression: all gentle and he swallowed. It was something Felicity had never expected to see on Oliver, not in relation with her. He’d seen her stomach before, right? Again he blinked and breathed.

“I just need to…” His other hand moved to do something, but with the gun his options were limited. Swiftly, in a move that kind made her bite down on her lip – it was just like in the movies – he deftly pushed the pistol into the back of his suit pants under his jacket, allowing the material to fall back over it. That was so Jason Bourne.

But then his hands were both free and she had bigger problems as they moved to pull the two sides of the hoodie apart.

She frowned. “Oliver?”

“I just need to see…” His hands continued to do the speaking for him, his fingers slipping under the left side of the grey hoodie, the course palm trailing across her shoulder as his other hand pulled the material as slowly and as gently as he possibly could up off her skin. Immediately a sharp lance of pain shot through her from neck to mid back and she hissed, the sound turning into a whimper.

She heard him murmur to her. “I know. I’m sorry.” And other things her brain couldn’t appropriately comprehend. It was like trying to translate white noise. The cold breeze that hit her, nulled by the intrusion of such an unexpected bout of agony, lit the hair follicles of her arms and she knew he could see the goose bumps as the soft grey material fell away from her left shoulder. When she was coherent she found her forehead was pressed into his shoulder this time.

“S-sorry.” She tried to move back but it was like her upper body had lost all of its strength; she was basically leaning against him.

But he wasn’t budging and her forehead slid against the warmer skin of his neck. “It’s alright.” An arm was wrapped over her good shoulder, holding the loose jacket up as his other hand pulled her injured shoulder against his front, his fingers working beneath the strap of the now unfortunately tight yoga top to gently lift it from what she presumed was a devastating slash. She could feel liquid trickle down her spinal column. “Stay there a second.”

But as per the norm she didn’t. She shifted, turning her face so that her cheek brushed his lapel, the bridge of her nose scraping across his jawline and she tried, hard, not to feel it, endeavouring to look over her shoulder. “How bad is it?”

“It’s not as bad as it probably feels.” He answered gruffly and peering up from her position she caught it. The smallest twinge, a pull of the brows, the dilation of a pupil… One look of thousands, which was all it really took for Oliver Queen to convey meaning – she spoke fluent ‘Oliver’ by now so she knew – that this particular expression was a mix of frustrated anxiety, concern and care. But, thankfully, no guilt.

Felicity angled her head some more, trying to see the damage from her angle. “Is-” She twisted too far and another cry of pain left her. Ah, oh, how do they deal with stuff like this on a day to day basis? Oliver and Dig, Sara and Roy, they both got injured, ritually, but none of them ever reacted with this little decorum. But it still burned like she was on fire.
Oliver pressed himself against her. Keeping her standing.

She rested her head back on his shoulder for a quick moment. Breathing heavily, her teeth bit down on her lower lip. You can do this. When she could eventually speak her words came out weak and high. “What did he do to me?”

“It’s about 4 inches between your spine and your left shoulder blade.” Oliver sounded so quiet, so present in the moment. And very dangerous. “A diagonal line.” He let out a breath that she felt on her skin and she shivered.

After a moment where all he seemed to do was stare at her injury he pulled the hoodie back over her shoulder and she dredged up the strength to move out of his space to get her arm back inside it.

“We need to get you out of here.” He told her as she concentrated on pulling her hand through the sleeve with igniting another flash of lava. His hands crept back to help her.

“Us, Oliver.” She cleared her throat. “Thank you.” He didn’t reply, just settled the material in front of her, pulling the zip back up like she was a child. And it should have bothered her but to be honest, it felt really good to be-

Car lights blared through the clearing around them, the thrust of an engine and the sound of rubber tires screeching as they were forced to brake following as a black van hit the road in front of them.

“It’s Diggle.”

She didn’t need Oliver’s declaration to know who it was. All she could concentrate on was that they were getting out of there. But no sooner had this satisfying thought entered her skull when said driver came bursting through the back doors of the vehicle, eyes wide but serious and catching Oliver’s.

“Oliver: we’ve got trouble!”
Part 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 5

“Oliver: we’ve got trouble!”

More trouble? Was that even possible at this point?

Feeling somewhat out of sorts, injured, bleeding and so very relieved Oliver and his family were - if not safe - fine. She glanced sideways at said women and felt sympathy curl in her gut when she caught Thea in Moira’s arms. They were swaying. She was pretty sure they’d been staring at both her and Oliver before Diggle had arrived but too much was happening to give that much thought. For now the threat of death had seemed to take some of the fight out of them. Understandable really…

Diggle proved that you could take the man out of the bodyguard but you couldn’t take the bodyguard out of the man. After practically bulldozing out the back door of their black van and declaring to Oliver that ‘bad’ was soon going to become ‘worse’, the first thing he’d made sure to do was secure his charges. The charges he’d made his own with unconscious affirmation from Oliver.

Your brother’s family were your own after all.

“Mrs Queen, Miss Queen,” he announced, already moving both women swiftly forwards with his hands on their upper backs. “We need to move.”

Oh God. Hands clenched inside her hoodie’s long sleeves Felicity caught Dig’s eye. “What’s going on?” Glancing from her to Oliver, who didn’t need to ask any questions since the look on his face was all the question Diggle needed to speak up.

Being very un-Diggle-like he gave off an air of anxiety as he nodded towards Slade’s immobile form, immediately stating. “He’s not alone.” Tone tight, the white of his eyes looked too bright in the darkness about them. “I was ambushed on the way here. Luckily the men he’s recruited don’t know shit about splintering their marks.” Ushering the Queen women away he led them to the back of the vehicle. “I managed to veer them off course but for how long that lasts…” He shook his head, a whole world of meaning conveyed in a single look as he glanced back at the pair of them. Though the thought was left hanging by a thread the sentence didn’t need finishing.

“You two okay?”

She bit her lip, barely hearing him.

Slade’s men… Where they Mirakuru enhanced? Watching as Dig was distracted by the Queen women - he tried to seat Moira down with a belt deftly attached across her stomach - Felicity’s mind ran an imaginative scenario. If Dig managed to steer them away from us by, God forbid, crashing or reverse flipping their cars it still would only buy us a few minutes. What if they attack when we’re on the road? All of us crammed into a single van? We’ll be target practice…

“Oliver?” It was Thea’s voice, looking over John’s shoulder, pale faced and intimidated. Her hand was reaching out to her brother who stood approximately 20 metres away. She wanted him near,
wanted her family – what was left of them - together. Moira didn’t look any better; both were refusing to be pushed fully into the vehicle without him.

Eyes flickering towards him Felicity saw the archer already nodding, giving them a reassuring glance before stepping into her personal space and reaching for her. Both his hands found places to park: her waistline and her forearm, securing her against him. She stumbled; bleary at him questionably. “O-Oliver?”

He moved forwards, forcing her to walk with him in short, quick strides. “We’re going.” His grip, steady but gentle, moved to curve round her hip and wrist, almost carrying her. His eyes flickered to hers. “Now.”

She could practically feel the tension coming off him in waves. “I’m fine.” Well, she wasn’t really but in the long scheme of things it wasn’t all that bad...

“Don’t argue with me on this one Felicity.” It was a growl of authority, one laced in worry.

Squashing the urge to eye roll at the man – sure, she’d been slashed by a madman but ‘Ever the Hypocrite Oliver’ had been through much worse himself - she allowed - yep; ‘allowed’, I should get that crochet on his leather pants or something - him to pull her along. She also tried not to focus on the warmth from his hands seeping through the material of her sweater onto her abnormally chilly skin…

Because it made her realize she was beyond freezing.

This is bad isn’t it? Her body temperature had plummeted. It isn’t good, that's for sure.

And he must have felt it too for, even at their pace, he managed to move in closer to her as if to provide body heat through sheer force of will alone. The intrusion of this peace of perfection however came in the shape, or rather sound of her mobile phone going off on its usual bender. Behind her.

Both of them froze. “I must have dropped it.” She muttered, knowing she couldn’t leave it here with the enemy and attempted to turn and retrieve it-

-He was too fast. A hand now sliding to her stomach he tugged her gently back into him so that her butt was pressing against the top of his very firm thigh – Felicity, stop it! ‘Sword wounds’ did things to her apparently. “Felicity.” She could already hear the ‘we don’t have time’ spoken in his ‘grr’ voice.

She rotated her wrist against his hold, letting him know that, no matter her condition- this was her choice. “Go on, I’ll be right behind you.” She really wanted her phone. It was like seeing Oliver without his bow. Which she just had come to think of it. Oliver firing a pistol had not been on the top-five-things-to-see-before-I-die list but it had been pretty-

The whisper thin brush of his fingers as they slipped down her wrist to entangle with hers halted her thoughts that were being streamed by the dozen. “I’m coming with you.”

“Oliver.” It was Diggle. And behind him was Moira struggling with her seatbelt as Thea tried to exit the van once again in an effort to be closer to her brother.

The look on Oliver’s face was voice enough: lips stretched thin and pressed together, his eyes were the selling point. They looked so torn, split between helping her and making his family secure, so blue and filled with that genuine care and consideration he held for the human race regardless of
what said race had put him through in years previous. It was the main reason that Felicity automatically trusted him that first time he asked for her help.

He really was a good man.

Lifting her free arm she placed her hand on his bicep, lightly pressing. “I’ll be fine. They need you right now.”

His head and gaze snapped to hers. “More than you?”

The words made her swallow… because in all honestly what she wanted from him right now he couldn’t give. And she had no right in asking for it. So she didn’t.

“If you can honestly look me in the eye and tell me that you’re fine right now…” His tone visceral but also quiet and soft, made her blink. Made her mouth slowly open. Oh. But she found herself nodding anyway, yes flickering towards his ever present family and back again.

“Yes.” She was fine. Indicating towards the hand grasping hers he got the point and let out a deep breath.

“’You have a minute Felicity.’”

He let her go.

She was already moving away, back towards the shrill sound of her mobile as it once again began to till. “I’m coming, I’m coming…” Note to self; stop talking to inanimate objects when surrounded by living, breathing people.

The trek back – not that it was much of one – felt much longer.

By the time she finally reached the place she realised, feeling like the dumb blonde in the truest sense, that the phone ringing wasn’t her own. Checking the ground, her hands automatically began to pat herself down before closing her eyes when the solid presence of her cell was felt in her left pocket.

*Blame it on the blood loss, the threat of death, Slade Wilson, Oliver hugs, Slade Wilson…* Slade Wilson.

The sound of the phone ringing started again.

Frowning Felicity opened her eyes and turned to stare at said man’s unconscious form.

Where a tiny bluish light could be seen from his open coat pocket where a mobile seemed to have fallen out onto his chest.

*You have got to be kidding me.*

Ignoring the creepy sensation of her cell and his had the same ringtone she moved towards him, slowly, carefully, feeling that something was suddenly so very off. Glimpsing Oliver in the background she found he had his hands full – literally – with Moira, who was telling him something and Digg had disappeared into the front of the van.

It would be stupid wouldn’t it? To walk over there and search the bad guy’s pockets? But it would take just a moment and… whoever was ringing him might give them a clue as to the man’s endgame. Other than to cause Oliver a lifetime of misery that is. How nice of him. It made a very
non-violent person like Felicity want to kick the man in the crotch.

I’ll do it – not kick him in the crotch - I’ll just go over there, it’ll take maybe three seconds to see who’s calling him and then make my way back to Oliver. With as many times as he’d been shot, plus drugged, she couldn’t see how Slade would be conscious or capable of any movement besides speech. Remembering how Oliver had put half a dozen rounds in the man she knew that Slade, being a Mirakuru monster, could have easily withstood such few bullets. He had been barely moving earlier. Maybe the drug hadn’t left his system after all.

Maybe. Hopefully.

Too late; she was already there.

Swallowing she let herself look the man over, covered in blood as he was he still cut an intimidating figure. But he was still unconscious so she took a breath and knelt down next to him.

“Be a good bad guy and stay asleep.” She reached for the glowing receiver and immediately saw a picture of Isabel in all her sharp toothed glory flashing across the screen. She cut it off with a swipe of her thumb and twisted to shout out to the group that they may have a further problem.

Which meant she didn’t see it coming.

Having the wind knocked out of your stomach? It really was a different kind of pain to evaluate.

The force of it made her abdominal muscles spasm, made her lungs expand to far too fast from the shock, made everything inside her halt for a moment, made her shake and mouth fall open as an odd, quiet strangled noise croaked from her gullet. Her eyes slammed closed for a significant second before flickering wide open and fearful to glance down…

Slade’s fist was embedded against her belly.

“Let’s see how the kid deals with this.”

It was like another slap to the face.

Said so cruelly, those words, however confusing, dealt in that rough tone and the depth of the soldier’s manic obsession with making Oliver and every blade of grass associated with him pay for his extreme loss, had Felicity slowly raising her gaze to his. Trembling she watched his brown eyes and found every example of humanity to be had within those depths. Too bad they were all undesirable facets of a whole she never wanted to see again.

Her middle throbbed, her back screamed with pain every time she tried to lift her arms above her chest line, her cheek pounded and she wanted to go home. She looked every bit the wrangled mess Slade probably saw her as. But that just meant he didn’t see the final arrow in her hand coming until the needle was lodged deep into the arm he’d launched at her.

He jerked, teeth clenched tight. Blinking hard and fast he still managed to smile a wicked slate of pure malice that had her tremors upscale to shivers. Foreboding. “The night’s… just beginning love.” His words were slurred. “I… have friends too.”

Then he yanked his arm back causing her a moment of sharp pain that surprised her as he finally rolled over and fell back into unconsciousness. Hopefully this time he’d stay there a while.

I… have friends too.
Stumbling backwards she stood, still staring down at the madman. Her mind started working at a million miles per hour, her heart racing.

Isabel’s face on his mobile. ‘I was ambushed on the way here’. More men, maybe more vehicles, possibly infected with Mirakuru. Oliver was bleeding, wounded. Knowing that he was a power house, as lethal as they come didn’t change that fact. Digg would be driving, Thea crying, Moira… completely unhelpful.

She blinked. Once. Twice.

Right…

And without thinking – again – about how insane she was obviously becoming she made a mad dash for the back of their van. With Oliver now over the threshold, well within the interior, his hands securing a calming Thea into the seat beside her mother he was easily too far inside to stop her.

Watching him with every bobbing step in her sprint she bit her lip, wishing by sheer force of will that he didn’t turn around.

If wishes were horses.

Catching his brief, reassuring smile to his kid sister he turned – oh good – ever so slightly as Felicity neared and those eyes, flickering towards her and narrowing in confusion almost made her stop. Mouth opening she saw him about to speak as that slow, serious frown of his began to work its way between his brows. Instinctively he knew that something was wrong.

He always does with me. Barely decelerating, she reached the set of black doors, almost flattening herself against them as he began to straighten, standing, the index finger and thumb of his right hand coming together. A shiver of apprehension flew through her the moment he took a step forward. “Felicity-”

Shoulder flaring, her hands slapped against metal and then she was gripping each handle, pulling back against them.

“No…” Again he knew, his head moving from side to side and shock delaying him for a moment before he abruptly dived forwards, towards her, knee be damned, reaching to push against the doors. Her eyes briefly caught his. “NO-”

-She slammed the doors closed in his face, twisting the lock of the handle latch.

“No!” Flinching at the pounding coming from inside as Oliver beat against the barrier she tripped backwards. “Felicity!” She forced herself to ignore his shout - I’m sorry - to leave, already running again down the length of the vehicle.

“Felicity, don’t!”

Sprinting past the driver’s seat she whammed her shoulder into Dig’s window. Beyond the partition he’d twisted around, facing the inside, reacting to Oliver’s shouts but whipped back at the sound of her elbow hitting the windshield. He frowned and she shouted to him, wide eyed, sending him a clear message. “GET THEM OUT OF HERE!”

Hand trying to release the lock mechanism his expression turned from puzzlement to worry. “What-”
Her finger tapping against the glass stopped him and she pointed beyond him, watching as he reflexively looked in that direction before she was sprinting away again - this time the way she’d arrived, through the tall grass.

Diggle had about three seconds to register that the glare of car lights through the openings of green, the roar of a harassed engine being forced to wade a car the size of a small truck through a couple of hundred metres of bushes and grassland before his mind started working and his foot crashed down on the accelerator, literally burning rubber.

“No, Digg!” Behind him Oliver’s voice was so very far from stable and the frightened cries from his mother and sister were only adding to the strain. “Felicity’s still outside!”

Teeth clenched together Dig swerved, avoiding the other car by inches as it trampled its way through the shrubbery. He heard Oliver crash not so gracefully into the side of the compartment. “Sorry man; no can do.”

“DIG!”

“I can’t Oliver!” He threw over his shoulder, gripping the steering wheel like his tether to sanity. “She’s already gone!”

“Go back for her!” The command came from about a foot behind him and Dig knew he had about two seconds before the man took the wheel by force.

Dammit. Again he ran the wheel, moving their van away from green-land and dirt road and back onto tarmac. “Listen-”

Before he could speak another word Oliver’s palm crashed into the dashboard, his other hand wrenching back on Dig’s shoulder. “OLIVER LISTEN; SHE’S-” In his peripheral he saw something that made him thank God for his or her timely interventions. “She’s already at her car!”

Intense, livid and confused (not a great combination for a fire starter such as Oliver) blue irises focused on deep brown. “What?”

Keeping eye contact with the man whilst employing his crazy driving skills was more difficult than he made it look. He didn’t need Oliver blowing like a canon. “There!” Dig pointed out the side window to about fifty metres ahead of them, to their right where Felicity’s tiny car went pelting down the roadway and praying, for the love of God, that Oliver would just take a breath of calm. “See? She’s fine man. It’s okay…”

The man was panting, staring in anxious bafflement at the steadily accelerating vehicle. “What is she doing?” And oh, by the look on his face it’s obvious the Arrow wasn’t a happy camper. “Why did she split from us?!”

“I think she’s trying to break them off.” Dig was reaching, he knew it. “Splinter. You know, multiple targets being more dangerous to go after? Since they obviously don’t know anything about how to do that…”

“I didn’t realise a red mini posed such a threat.” It was a snarl, a croak of something Diggle hadn’t expected to hear from his friend, comrade, and brother.
Oliver was afraid.

But it wasn’t fear for himself.

John cleared his throat. “I think she knew.” With a jerk Oliver ripped his gaze from the road back to Dig’s. “I think she knew that something was going to happen.”

“But how…” It lasted maybe two seconds but those two cold moments of realisation transformed his face from pained bafflement to fearful comprehension. His eyes watered not with fear or sadness, but with trembling rage.

Eyes flickering to Oliver, to the rear-view mirror, to the side window in an endless cycle Dig spoke. “What is it man?”

It was explained in a solitary word. “Slade.”

“What are you talking about? He was unconscious!”

“I don’t know! But it wouldn’t be the first time he’s deceived people like that.” The older man had moved so slowly before, still being drugged, and if Oliver hadn’t been injured, what happened after that… wouldn’t have. Gritting his teeth Oliver opened his mouth to continue when he saw, since his eyes hadn’t once left the progression of the mini, another car; this one black as well, roll out of nowhere up ahead.

It sped up, veering right, directly into the path of the red mini.

Apprehension stirred in his gut and he was one second from forcing the side door open and shooting iron into the enemy vehicle. “Dig, speed up-”

Before he could finish the black car crashed side on into Felicity’s, both cars derailing to opposite sides of the road.

There were no words from him. No sound. It was as if someone had forced a fist down his oesophagus to pull at the muscles in his chest: they contracted so forcefully it actually hurt, cutting off the flow of air. There was a moment, such a small moment were time seemed to slow and he watched, his eyes raging at the sight, fascinated and terrified as Felicity’s car skidded, still in motion, across to the other side of the road and the other car-

“Well I’ll be damned…” John’s hoarse voice muttered as they both watched the black car be defeated by its own momentum. It almost twirled, eventually flipping sideways, screeching off the tarmac and onto dirt path into a nest of heavy shrubbery.

Oliver stared, wide eyed, deep fear and shock keeping him frozen in time. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. For it to be Felicity… But her car simply continued down the road, albeit a little wobbly. He could hear the beat of his heart thudding in his head, the flow of blood thundering in his ears making sound impossible to discern.

…Not even the tell-tale shudder and pull of the van moving much too fast as it manoeuvred away from the gunfire he could now hear echoing around them from outside could break the white noise in his brain.

Felicity…

Diggle was shouting. “Hold on!” Taking his foot off the acceleration he forced the van backwards, shooting a path directly parallel to the second vehicle in hot pursuit of them.
But as usual there were only two people on the planet that could make or break Oliver Queen.

“Mom!”

Blinking back to himself, Thea’s voice behind him forced Oliver into action.

His hand grabbed at Dig’s sidearm, “hey, what are you-” and before Dig could finish Oliver forced the left side door of the van to slide open, wind whipping against his face as they sped past the enemy.

“Oliver!”

It wasn’t the best time to be distracted by his mother so Oliver simply allowed his body to fall sideways, catching his weight with his right arm so that half of him leaned outwards into the night.

With his left arm he raised the pistol.

“It’s alright Mrs Queen…” He heard Dig say, perhaps calming his mother or his sister who were probably attempting to reach him.

He sighted down the barrel…

“He’s done this before.”

And pulled the trigger twice.

**CRACK, CRACK!**

Each bullet tore a hole into the back tyres sending the black vehicle into a skidding, sliding death ride.

Quickly pulling himself back inside he gritted his teeth, feeling every inch of the car crash from earlier score fire through his ribs. Heaving a breath he slid the door home and his eyes caught sight of his mother and sister, both holding hands, watching him with expressions filled with astonishment. With fear. He closed his eyes, his hands pressing himself away from the door and his family until he reached Diggle again.

“You got them.” The man stated before Oliver could ask. “They won’t be moving any time soon.”

“Not unless they decide tonight’s the night to give chase.” It was a morose thought but he knew that if Slade decided to, he and his family wouldn’t last the night.

Not like this.

The speed meter progressed. “Depends on what he was after in the first place.”

Blue eyes flickered away. *To turn my life into a shell of what it is, after trying so hard to rebuild some form life for myself? To gift me with misery, to take away the people I hold most dear? Those I love the most, to make it so that when my time finally comes that I’ll be begging for death… only for him to not grant me one?*

Before he could stop himself his hand was inside Dig’s jacket pocket, pulling out his friend’s phone.

He couldn’t help it.
“Hey man, what are you doing?”

Oliver’s voice was hoarse, unspent emotion turned against him as he pressed buttons. “Calling Felicity.”

“While she’s driving?”

He didn’t answer, choosing instead to simply press the cell to his ear, his eyes riveted to her small car ahead of them.

When she didn’t immediately pick up he pressed his lips together to hold in the agitated whine building up in his throat, nails and fingers digging into Dig’s headrest, leg jiggling on the spot anxiously. Five seconds in he was two away from jumping cars, screw his injuries, when the line clicked and he heard her voice.

“Dig?”

It was a rasp of fear, of pain, soft in tone and he could hear the relief there as well.

A lance of something painful shot through his chest. “It’s Oliver.”

“Oh… Hey you.”

Hey you. Different. And there was something about it which had him swallowing. “Are you alright?”

“T-I’m fine. Well, all things considered…”

She sounded like she was in pain. “Felicity.”

“Oliver, really I’m…”

“If you say ‘I’m fine’ again I won’t be.” Felicity in pain wasn’t something he could deal with like a sane person.

There was a momentary pause. “Okay then, I won’t.”

“Good.” He could practically see her huff and gritted his teeth. “Now pull the car around and get in the van.”

“Er, Oliver the van is in motion, besides I’m fine right here.”

“Felicity, you were just in a car crash. Usually people get the police involved or an ambulance-”

“I wouldn’t exactly say that today is a normal day…”

“Felicity!”

“Oliver-ah!” Her gasp hissed down the line and he felt like throwing up. “Oh.” It sounded as if she’d moved the wrong joint at the wrong time.

“You’re not alright.” In his peripheral he glimpsed Dig shoot him a look of concern. “Just turn around, we’ll take care of the rest.”

He heard her take a shallow, hitched breath. “The car barely grazed me. I mean sure, my arm hurts a little but that’s pretty light compared to what could have happened.”
Teeth set, lips pressed tight, he nodded - not out of agreement, no, but disconcertedly, regardless of the fact that she couldn’t see it. “You’re not helping.”

She continued onwards as if he hadn’t said a word. “Besides it isn’t the best idea to have all of us in the same place.”

“Are you trying to make yourself a target? Was that your plan?”

“What? No! God no, I have no plan really; completely plan-less. I just thought having more than one target would make it easier for you to handle them. And er…” Her swallow was loud enough to hear down the line. “Okay, is there any way I can say this without you blowing it all out of proportion?” Her mutterings quickly turned to ponderings. “Though you’d probably have everything right? Of course you wouldn’t, why would I even think such a thing? I should just-”

Every word she spoke made increased the dread still swirling inside him. “Felicity!” Her reply was lightning quick.

“I just got off the phone with Slade.”

It was like a bomb just went off inside his skull. “What? What happened?!?” Why her?

“Actually nothing happened.” As if she could sense his scepticism she continued at speed again. “Really, he just said ‘I’m calling a ceasefire; you get three days, no one else will come after you’ and then he hung up.”

“Why was he calling you?”

“Maybe because he destroyed your cell?”

Or maybe it was a reminder that Slade was everywhere, could go anywhere and he’d powerless to stop him. His fingers pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t like this.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to.” Yes, she sounded shaky and tired and afraid; they were the undercurrents to the bravery in her voice. His eyes closed. “Are you alright?” She asked quietly after a long moment.

“No.” He replied; the volunteering of the honest response shocking her if her silence was anything to go by. “I need to get a foothold here.” So he grasped at something tangible, something he could change, could make better. “And I’ll feel better once I get a better look at your injuries.”

“…Okay. Just make sure your mom’s alright, and Thea-”

“I need you to be safe.”

It just slipped out. Why?

“Oliver I will be.” Despite everything there was a smile in her voice and something in her tone… a fondness. “I’ll be with you.”

With me.

It took him one second to decide. “Meet us at the mansion.”

Getting off the phone – but not returning it – Oliver remained standing behind Dig. He took in a breath, let it out.
“Dig?”

“Yeah man?”

“Did you know Felicity could use a crossbow?”

He blinked, arched a brow. “Crossbow? She used a crossbow?”

Oliver nodded to himself. “Never mind.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah so this took a while, I'm sorry but I'm working on other fics too. And you know, the Arrow/Flash finales killed me dead in all sorts of good ways :) Please comment
Almost at the end peoples; sorry for the long wait and thank you Elizabeth (is that the right name?) for the lovely review. This is for you.

Part 6

It was probably the first time in her life that Felicity prayed to God that her tiny mini would magically transform into something bulkier, heavier. Like, say, a tank. *That would be nice; the timing sublime even!*

But almost getting battered off the road will do that to a girl.

Not the least in part to the fact that it had been Isabel Rochev behind the wheel of the black beamer. *A BMW; of course. I knew she hated me.* It went far beyond mere dislike when a woman deliberately tries to kill you dead (*because when the car fumes cause an explosion in the toppled car, off the side of the road, that’s when you’re really dead - if I had an eye roll for every thought…) in the middle of nowhere.

She’d seen it as she’d stolen a peripheral glance; the manic look in those big brown eyes, eyes that could have been warm, would have been pretty, if they weren’t blazing lasers of loathing through her. It had chilled Felicity. Had made her swallow and shake. Had made her feel so very fragile. So very not a match for Isabel Rochev or any beautiful woman driving god knows many tonnes of steel into her sub-standard car. She’d never been a receptacle for that kind of venom.

Isabel’s smile of the victory she’d almost grasped had been what made Felicity remember the amazing driver that she is and that this was not the time to allow her insecurities, however baseless or true, to take over. A little footwork, some fancy coordination with hands and fingers made to rework computers and break through the unbreakable and all she suffered was a slap on the wrist.

*Well… more like a dislocated shoulder. And if it isn’t dislocated then why not?* It hurt enough.

She *wouldn’t* think, not for a moment, about the fact that Isabel might need medical attention. Couldn’t grasp that Slade had deliberately used his knowledge of Oliver to, even after *everything* he’d already put him though, instil more pain. To twist the knife. *Because the man couldn’t possibly get enough. He eats pain, breathes it, and sleeps with it like a warm blanket…*

Of course he did. What else did he have?

He didn’t have his Shado.

*She must have been beautiful too, must have been tough. Must have been able to take care of herself,* because the few times that Oliver had spoken of the woman, he’d done so with such feeling, such subtle reverence and respect. Far from making her timid and whatever comparison her mind could have made, it just made her feel sad. That Oliver had lost yet another person he held dear, no matter the relationship. No matter the cost to keep it.
And who on the planet could honestly say that he deserved this? *I mean, what could he have possibly done?*

It didn’t matter. It wasn’t enough to condone murder.

Yet the amazing thing about Oliver, the thing she’d accepted but knew he’d never really see inside himself is that after all this, after the lies and the pain, after Slade and Malcom, after surviving… he’d still only be thinking about those around him, those closest to him; the people he loves and cares for. So detached from himself, his own self-worth was so incredibly wretched he now saw a scar as a thing that just ‘happens’. As a mark deserved. As a reminder of failure.

It was why his phone call hadn’t surprised her.

He’d needed a grasp on something tangible, at least until he could navigate through his thoughts without stepping on an emotional landmine. With how the night was shaping she was surprised he even had an emotional tether to cling to anymore.

And she wanted to be near him. Soon. Oliver meant ‘safety’.

Not you’re a-typical, freedom from harm safety. No. The ‘safe’ where she knew that no matter what happened she’d be with her family. With those she held most dear. Those she could breathe with and find relief with. And though it past all manner of social propriety, especially where Moira Queen was standing, she really just wanted him to hug her again.

She knew what it felt like now. And part of her wished she didn’t because she’d already begun to crave it all over again. Those course hands, his surprisingly soft touch, the strength in his tenderness…

There was no safer place in the world than Oliver’s arms.

But she didn’t even have the right over those fantastic arms. Sara did. It was so sad that her first thought was to have another woman’s man hold her close. *Friends hug right? I’ve hugged Dig and that was nice… albeit his holding me didn’t make me want to fall into him; it was gentle and spoke of all things kind. But not ‘home’. Home. I’m the worst.*

She blinked finding that she’d arrived at the mansion before they had. But she didn’t get out, didn’t look around for a sign of their approach, she simply turned off the engine and bowed her forehead against the steering wheel.

*My heart’s racing. She needed it to stop. It’s been on red alert for a while now and the extra blood flow wasn’t helping her deal with the pain in her shoulder, on her back or her stomach. Breathe. Just Breathe.*

She even considered reaching for phone and calling Sara again. Calling Oliver, just to hear his voice sooth away all the crap and bad feelings but no matter how hard she tried she couldn’t get her fingers to move. White noise filled her ears and she tried to swallow. She was having a panic attack.

*I thought I’d been brave. This isn’t brave.*
She was still in the car.

They hadn’t been quiet on their approach. Practically swerving, Dig had pulled no stops in his effort to keep up with his friend. But Felicity had kept a fast pace, speeding away from them and the only conclusion they could manage was that adrenaline was forcing her hands. Diggle kept it above 90 but couldn’t push like Oliver wanted him too; not with his mother and sister practically vibrating with fear in the back. It hadn’t helped his mental state.

He didn’t want to be where he was; he wanted in her car. Just wanted to make her feel safe, even if he was, in his opinion, the last option to ever be considered for safety. But she’d said that. She’d said she was safe with him. And if there was one thing he was going to do right tonight, one thing to make it all worth it, was to at least make sure that Felicity Smoak – the stubborn brave-heart, the light in the darkest places, Felicity Smoak, his girl Wednesday - was secure. That was all.

Secure with him. And when she was safe, he too would be. He couldn’t explain that, didn’t want to try. It didn’t matter. For once it had to easy, had to be alright to just act on how he felt. Just this once. Could he have that? Was that alright?

After stepping down, carefully, from the van he’d limped as fast as he could around the front. Just to see her.

But now he was standing outside and she was still. In. The. Car.

His blue eyes – wide, focused and close to frantic - stared.

Get out of the car.

He willed her too. She’d never kept him waiting before; not with work, not with anything. And if she kept him waiting now, if she didn’t get out, then it was because she couldn’t get out.

She couldn’t get out.

A sound escaped him; it was quiet, something he didn’t recognise, but he saw Felicity through the front window of her car, head against the wheel and that was all the push he needed. Forgetting his leg he almost sprinted to the door closest to his blonde haired IT girl.

“Oliver!”

“Ollie!”

He didn’t turn.

Shaking fingers grasped the handle but it wouldn’t move; there was a large dent on this side. “Dig; take them into the house.” His eyes momentarily hit John’s as he reached his target and they had a moment of silent communication. “I’ll be there in a minute.” I just... I need to do this. Please. Let me do this right. Let me make this better.

If he was a fearful man, a man who believed in God and all his works he’d have thanked the elusive figure for granting him a best friend like John Diggle, who only nodded, lips pressed together, eyes shooting to and fro, from him to Felicity, and knew he wanted to help too. But wouldn’t. Just this once. Unless Oliver fell over - because as much as he’d like it to be true, his endurance for physical injury wasn’t endless. “Sure man. I’ll pour you a scotch.” And roll out the med kit.
It wasn’t hard to ignore the odd mixture of curiosity and judgement on his mother’s face but it was surprising, catching the understanding that his sister offered. In the van she’d been stunned by his actions and he was so afraid that she’d fear him. When she quieted it fed this worry. But all he saw now was her weary eyes that flickered towards Felicity, screened by her little car, before Dig ushered the two women up the steps to their mansion.

Then his hands were against the car window as he bent and peered anxiously through towards the front seat, his agitated breath fogging up the glass.

“Felicity?”

His chest physically hurt when she showed no proof that she’d heard. His eyes travelled, feeling *everything* as he took in her slumped form and the white ridge of the knuckles of her hands against the wheel. She was having her freak out, but he could just glimpse the blood over her shoulder, *she can’t stay in there*. “Felicity!”

There was a visible jerk but she didn’t lift her head. “Oliver?”

Quiet. Muffled by the barrier, but *so* sure. “Hey.” He swallowed at how he sounded. Broken yet uplifted. *How is that even possible?* “Are you okay?” *Stupid question.* She must have thought so too because she didn’t answer. “Can you open the door please?”

“Can’t.” Slowly, her head left the safety of her arms and he got a good look at her. At the slight swelling of her cheek, the scrape above her brow…

*I fucking hate you Slade Wilson. For this, I will hate you.* “What do you mean?”

“The door’s stuck. I tried to get it open but…” Her voice wobbled and she swallowed, her right hand coming up to smooth over forehead, like she had a headache, which she probably did. “My shoulder’s killing me. I keep shaking and I don’t know why.”

“Adrenaline.” His voice was barely a murmur, almost a caress. “It happens. It’s normal.” *Open the door.*

Her head shook, blonde hair spilling everywhere like a golden cascade. “I’m sorry; I’m trying not to be a full blown mental case here, but when I stopped the car…” She took a deep breath, shuddering and he realised how hard she was trying not to cry. “All of a sudden the silence got to me and I couldn’t-God I was supposed to keep it together; you don’t need this right now!”

But he was already moving, his head speaking a ‘don’t’ and a ‘never’. “No, no, Felicity…” Licking his lips, he pushed himself further forwards until his nose almost touched the pane, “no.” His hands left streaks of sweat where they dragged down with him. “I can’t even tell you how amazing I think you are.”

A beautiful but painful little noise whimpered past her gullet. “No… I’m *not* I was supposed to be Sara.” She closed her eyes, licking her lips. “But I’m not. I’m not her and I’m not Laurel.” Her breath caught. “I’m not Shado.”

Her voice was the quietest of wails, like a child’s; a child who’d learned to hide behind walls of intelligence, behind glasses she didn’t really need, a child who didn’t think she’d ever be good enough. But he heard it, those words she considered shameful - *I was scared*. The genuine smile that it wrought was impossible to stop and he tried with everything he had to control the raw ache behind his eyes. He loved it; the sheer honesty, Felicity’s painful truth that she was just throwing at him because she trusted him.
She trusted him. He already knew that but it felt… different somehow. Heady.

Would they mind, his family, if he just crawled into her car and stayed there for the rest of the night?

“…Then I’m grateful.”

He watched her blink, confused and surprised. She still managed not to cry though she had good reason; his mother and sister had been crying for the past half hour. And he wondered how she saw him then, crouched outside her car. He knew how he looked at her and it wasn’t the way he looked at anyone else; knew it was tender and held no judgement, no disappointment. That was impossible. Because she was his grace. She was the reason he could smile the way he was smiling, a real smile.

“If you were Sara or Laurel or even Shado… I would have lost my mother tonight. I would have lost my baby sister.

Utterly disarming in how she looked; her mouth open like he remembered her from two years ago, with that red pen. Her eyes filling with so much meaning, so much gratitude, like she couldn’t believe he held her to such esteem. Like he’d been waiting for, her eyes filled but she still didn’t start crying. She just folded in on herself, nodding for him, okay – I’m okay and you’re okay and you made me feel safe again – but she needed a minute.

Didn’t matter. He’d seen her upset before, had caused her tears a few times. Ignoring it wasn’t optional.

Pulling himself up, feeling all the marks of the day on his body he hobbled to the other side of the car. Bracing against the roof as he opened the door and bent, carefully sliding halfway inside, lips pressed together and forehead furrowed against the wave of pain he felt in his side. He felt her hand on his arm again and wondered, for the fiftieth time that year, why her touch made him tingle and burn.

He caught her watching him, pulling herself together and smiling slightly. “Sorry.”

He shook his head. “It’s nothing.” Leaning towards her, legs planted strategically to carry her weight if needed, he lifted a hand for her to take. “Come on.” I need you out of this car.

She nodded, moving and immediately wincing.

His insides immediately contracted. “Shoulder?”

“And back.” She gasped as she lifted herself of her seat, climbing out, with a hand against the dashboard. “I’ll live.”

His latched onto her arm as she hit the next seat, before slipping down as he balanced towards her, trailing underneath her armpit, until his arm was wrapped around her. “I’ve got you.” Her side hit into his he tugged her towards him with a grunt that sounded a little too desperate to ignore.

In one smooth motion she was out of the car.

“Oof!” Feet hitting pavement, her legs seemed to turn to jelly and she wobbled but he didn’t let her go far.

Chests heaving with the effort involved and with her back touching the car, he moved the arm he’d braced on top of it and pressed into her, using his thighs to keep her straight. Like this he was very
easily able to snake his arms around hers and hold her tight against him.

And just like that, the world was put to rights. Everything fell into pace.

A soft sound left her before he felt her nuzzle into his shirt, arms and hands pressing against his chest and all of it feeling so natural when it shouldn’t, couldn’t… but did. There was a long moment of silence until a breathless sound left her; a soft laugh that crinkled the space around his eyes.

“You read my mind.”

A loud, deep exhale left him at how she was sinking into the comfort he was offering and it fluttered her hair. “It’s my superpower.” He murmured.

“Never knew you had a super power.” Deft, cold fingers burrowed their way underneath his damp jacket.

“Newly developed.” God, it was so comforting, once again, holding her and being held by her. “Are you okay?”

“Getting there. This is helping. Didn’t realise you were so good at giving hugs.” Her words were filled with tired laughter.

Shrugging was too much effort and it would mean moving, even a little, away from the peace. “No one ever told me I was.”

“That’s… surprising.”

“Hm.” The hum, so low and quiet, and the words that followed quieter still - he could barely hear them. “We need to…” A jolt echoed through him at the shot of regret he felt upon just thinking his next words. “We need to get inside Felicity. Get you patched up.” It would mean moving… and explaining. Talking. Pain.

“Mm…” She sounded ridiculously content and a big part of him just wanted to fall with her to the ground and sleep. “But that would mean moving.”

Her vocalising his own thoughts just made a huff of surprise laughter leave him and he winced as it pulled at his side.

And then she was moving. “Okay, it looks like we both need a little patching up.” She twisted in his hold until he dropped an arm and one of hers grazed under one of his. “Which is so weird; I’m not used to being the injured one.”

“Be so sorry…”

She shook her head. “No.” And simply looked at him. “No.”

Head resting against the ball of his shoulder she looked up into his eyes and he saw everything; her tiredness, her compassion, her goodness, her light. Her love. It was all there. My life, my choice. He couldn’t fight against that, the natural steel of her soul that wasn’t cold at all; simply unyielding.

Taking whatever strength she was offering, he sucked in as deep an exhale as bruised ribs would allow. “Okay.”

Those pretty blue eyes practically lit the dark places inside him. The side of her mouth lifted and it
Felicity was as soft as rainfall. “Now let’s help each other.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Leaning against the other, what should have been a hobble became more of a lazy stroll. Felicity walked against the side of his body that wasn’t aching, so he could pretty much let himself feel each step she took without gritting his teeth against a throb of agony. In turn he managed to latch an arm across her shoulders and tug her upright, to keep her body aligned with his; it would easier on her back if she wasn’t leaning forwards so much.

They reached the steps and together began to climb, staring forwards.

“You okay?” He asked, not looking at her yet.

“Yeah. I’m a little warm actually. Which is also weird; I was freezing before.”

He frowned, something about her words striking memories he couldn’t quite summon, when the front door opened soundlessly and Diggle peered out at them. Pistol in hand; his face was a stern mix of focused will and gentle concern and he let loose a deep breath when he saw the two of them already there. Oliver winced when he realised the man had probably been wondering where they’d gotten to.

Dig holstered his gun. “How you both doing?” He asked, good naturedly shaking his head at Felicity who stumbled on the last stair and would have gone flying if it weren’t for Oliver. Hand now further down her side, his face brushed into her loose hair and stilled momentarily when he felt the continuous tremble of her skin under his hoodie that she wore. His fingers pressed in as Dig continued. “Crossbow? Reckless endangerment?” Said with dry humour, Oliver still caught the flicker of brown that Felicity didn’t notice as the man took in the blood on her, the arm securely wrapped around her, the expression on the vigilante’s face... “You’re as bad as he is.”

And she scoffed – of course she did – but her eyes slightly unfocused as they crossed over the threshold. “No one is as bad as he is.”

A sound of divergence escaped him, a grumble of displeasure in lieu of the steadily rising concern churning in his gut as he took her in, side on, and she chuckled like he’d wanted her too. It was followed by a cough though, more of a wheeze, her cheeks a little pink and he could see a light sheen gathering across her forehead.

His eyes caught Dig’s.

*We need to take a look at her.*

It was unbearable. *Why is it so warm?*

‘Warm’ didn’t cover it. Hot. Feverish. Burning her from the inside out.

*Did all sword wounds do this?*

“I’ve got her man.”
But she only knew because the words were spoken close her ear. The arm lightly closed around her form felt reluctant to leave but a feminine voice, a sound quiet and light and all things ‘young’ pulled him away. Oliver.

Attentiveness to reason her surroundings was suddenly something she was incapable of.

She felt herself being lowered to someplace cushioned. “Here we go.” Dig again.

It was scaring her. Just a minute before everything had been crystal clear. Oliver’s voice, his words, the comforting weight of his arm across her shoulder’s… and then they started on the stairs to the mansion and she went from freezing to sweltering. Her field of vision turned blurry. Cloudy. Ugh. Like the one time I had a pot brownie, except I blew up like a melon and started to asphyxiate. Peanuts do kill.

“No Oliver, you need to get that checked out.”

Thankfully her hearing still worked perfectly.

“No, I’m alright.” She could tell how far away he was from those three words - too far.

Keep it together Felicity.

“Oliver.” Moira. “You’re bleeding. Please let us call the family doctor; he could be here within the hour.” Felicity felt like chuckling. Good luck with that: I have a better chance of winning ‘Miss State’ than you do of getting Oliver to see a doctor, never mind making him staying still enough for an examination.

“No mom, we can’t. There’ll be too many questions.” She heard him take a deep breath and could vision those lovely shoulders of his – shoulders that curled around you when they hugged you, the spheroidal joints of which her hands fit perfectly around, and made you feel safe – rising and falling. “Besides this isn’t anything I’m not used to. I’ve had worse.”

There was a moment where no sound interrupted the descending swirl of Felicity’s thoughts – thoughts and flashes that were filled with Slade’s sword, Oliver, soft words, promises, fear and hope – before Moira spoke.

“I-I know.” What does she know? “But-”

“Trust me mum; Dig’s got this.”

“I have extensive military training Ma’am and have had thorough experience with medical procedures in the field. As you well discovered when you hired me.”

“…I see.”

“And Oliver’s pretty adept at looking after himself.”

“As I’ve discovered.”

“…Right.”

The hidden conversation in that dialogue was so obvious Felicity grimaced.

Moira let out a quiet sigh. “Alright – then let Mr Diggle look at you.” Mr Diggle. She couldn’t even summon up the energy to smile at that one.
“No. Not yet.”

“Oliver—”

“Felicity first.”

“I’ll go get the med kit…”

And just like that the rush of warmth before the usual blush explodes across her face started in her chest, except dusty pink didn’t bloom over her extremities. Unnatural in the way it made her shake, it forced her heart to beat faster.

“We can’t ring the police can we?”

“Doesn’t matter; they wouldn’t be able to do anything…”

Their voices melded together for a while as Felicity concentrated on taking breaths. She figured if she moved even an inch she’d fall sideways or something equally as embarrassing. Truthfully, she felt as if she’d been drugged, which she hadn’t. Maybe it was blood loss or shock – did shock make you see everything in colourful streaks?

Understandably it took her a moment to realise there was a hand slowly rubbing her upper left arm.

“Hey Felicity? Are you okay?” Thea? “Felicity?” There was movement in her peripheral before a female shape stepped before her, blurred hands reaching out for the hoodie she wore. “What is that?” What’s what? “Is that… Ollie? Ollie did she get hit in the stomach too?”

…What?

There was a brush of air and suddenly a larger form, one wearing dark colours stepped fully into her line of sight. Oliver’s hand went immediately to the back of her skull before his fingers trailed down to rub across the back of her neck. That’s reeeeeally nice….

“You’re too warm.” He murmured. His hand pulled round slightly to press his palm against the side of her neck, checking her pulse and an involuntary whine left her – she was in two minds; he’d stopped the simple pleasure of his caress but the palm of his hand felt like a concentrated dose of ‘Oliver’ that she didn’t want to lose – unfortunately the whine sounded less pathetic but more… aching. Like she was in pain. Am I in pain?

Whatever it was she felt him still before his fingers pressed harder into her skin. If was even remotely coherent eight now my eyes would be rolling into the back of my head.

“Oliver, look at her stomach.”

“Her…”

She saw him crouch down and tried so hard to point out that his knee needed healing but the energy involved seemed like too much to ask for.

His fingers only briefly touch the material of the hoodie - worryingly she didn’t feel a thing there – before he stopped. “You’re bleeding,” Oh... His voice hurt her. Don’t be upset. “Felicity why are…”

But he was looking at her and she… couldn’t really see him. I need to say something. Just his blurred outline. Her thoughts were chasing sleep but something deep down told her she could let
herself dream right now. Not yet.

“Felicity?”

And then his hands – God, those hands, perfect hands – were against her face, moulded to her cheeks and he’d come closer, rocking forwards on his shins. She wished she could see his eyes but again; hazy.

“Felicity. Look at me.” Aren’t I already? His palms gently forced her face to align directly with his. “Felicity! What happened?” His voice though direct and focused was also tender and so, so aching. “What did he do?” I forgot… Slade. Slade…

“…He… punched me.” Finally. Words.

But did he just punch me?

Because being punched didn’t make someone feverish, didn’t make it so that your stomach numbed but the rest of you burned. It didn’t make your words die.

“He punched you? When you went to get your phone?” She tried to nod against his hold but barely managed any movement at all.

All she could concentrate on were the harsh breaths suddenly beating against her face. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Oliver.

Never in a million years did Felicity think Oliver could sound like that with her: as if he were breaking and she was the only person who could put him back together. Except she was breaking too and that meant he could fall down again, could shatter into pieces that he would later label as ‘villain’, ‘monster’, ‘poison’ and ‘hopeless’.

She could hear him, as if his thoughts were hers. You didn’t tell me. And though painful, they filled a hole inside she didn’t know was open. Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you let me come with you? You stopped me from shooting him but I would gladly sacrifice my sanity to stop him from hurting you. Instead you saved me. And look where it’s gotten you? What am I supposed to do about that? How am I supposed to react? Tell me.

But again, she was so tired, too tired to explain anything. And the heat didn’t burn any longer, didn’t make her warmer. She couldn’t feel it – the pain had numbed it. It was everywhere now and was pulling her under. Fighting it was futile because this wasn’t normal, it wasn’t her body’s way of saying ‘sleep’. There was something inside her now… and there was no escaping it.

And suddenly she realised exactly what was wrong with her.

No. It wasn’t fair. Oliver. Wasn’t fair to Oliver. She didn’t care what happened to her, not anymore, because as long as she was with her family it didn’t matter. The problem, what she did care about was knowing just how Oliver was going to react. If I had it in me to hate another person, I would hate Slade Wilson. You son of a bitch.

He hadn’t punched her. Slade had cut her again. And he’d infected her, nicking her skin with the arrow she’d stabbed him with which would have held the tiniest trace amount of his own blood.

With every ounce of will she possessed she managed to look him in the eye, her breaths uneven, her body trembling and her fingers brushed tentatively across his chin.
“Don’t freak out.”

And with that her arm dropped with a slap against her thigh and her body fell forwards. The last sensation to feel was the press of Oliver beating heart against her own.

*I’m sorry*...

------

*Don’t freak out.*

“Dig!”

She’d fallen against him, everything in her just letting go – her consciousness, her words, her body loosing whatever it was that made them ‘Felicity’.

A streak of pure and unadulterated fear spliced up his spine.

His hands still grasping her face, thumbs tracing the hidden levels in her skin and all he could do was stare at her, open mouthed and terrified.

*Don’t freak out.*

Her pulse had skyrocketed and she was so pale.

“Ollie-”

The panic in Thea’s voice made him move and pulled Felicity towards him, roughly forcing her face under his chin as an arm pushed against her back, against her wounds, hoping the jostle would jolt her to consciousness… but it didn’t. It *didn’t*.

*Why had she - why wasn’t she moving? What – why - I don’t understand.*

Twisting so fast he was surprised that his head didn’t snap right off his neck his eyes searched frantically. His mother was there staring at him and he absently wondered what on earth she could see in him that would make his mother so perturbed and so upset. “Dig.” It was all he could say, forcing the name out of his gullet like he’d swallowed glass.

Thea was already with him as she sped to the door way, looking beyond it before calling back over her shoulder to Oliver. “He’s coming!” She turned away again. “Diggle!”

*“JOHN!”*

It just ripped out of him, echoing throughout the house. It hurt his throat and made him realise that, yes, a person could make horror and devastation a sound. His mother jumped, almost tripping out of her dolce heels but Thea didn’t – she just looked close to desperate tears and moved aside as footsteps thundering down the hall could be heard.

*“JOHN!”*

He knew his friend was already there but he couldn’t stop the shout, couldn’t stop the way he’d
begun to rock, as if the lulling rhythm would soothe Felicity regardless of whether she were unconscious. It was ridiculous but he did it anyway.

And then Dig was there, eyes wide and alarmed. “What is it, what happened?”

Oliver immediately rose, taking Felicity with him. “Something’s wrong with her,” he said to him as his hand gently cupped her skull and tried to move Felicity’s pale face into view, to show Diggle the problem. “Her pulse is too fast, she’s too hot and her stomach’s bleeding.” He spoke so quickly. “She just fell unconscious and I had trouble getting her to focus before she did.”

Already at their sides Dig nodded, hands on and waved the med kit. “Where can we put her?” His hands moved in such a way that made Oliver think he was going to reach for her.

Straightaway he lowered himself, ignoring his mother’s plea for him to be careful and swiftly placing a hand underneath Felicity’s thighs and an arm across her back before lifting her.

She was light.


And she smelt like his hoodie, like him. What is this? He pulled her into him, fingers curving her shoulder towards his and looked at Dig. Who grit his teeth. And levelled a disproving glance before it quickly vanished into acceptance. Oliver knew his knee would suffer for this but only another man would understand why. Why he lifted her when he didn’t have to. So he didn’t say a word.

“We can go to my old room.”

He didn’t notice the climb there, didn’t pay attention to how long it took, which was forever and also only a second. Dig was already several paces ahead and was acquainting himself thoroughly with his altogether more affective medical equipment in his personal bathroom by the time Oliver entered.

When he finally set her down he did so carefully, slowly. At first he sat her on the edge of his mattress, his good knee place beside her before lowering her back until she rested against the duvet.

Then he was out of his jacket and tie, his shirt sleeves rolled up with practised fingers as his eyes sought and stayed fixed against the red spot of the stomach of the grey hoodie. He didn’t think, couldn’t, didn’t want to. It would have to wait; he couldn’t lose it right now…

Dig ran back in and paused at the sight of Oliver’s left hand under the hoodie, holding her with a knee between her thighs for balance. Cradling her form with his fingers splayed against her spine and coating them with her drying blood without a care, he gradually pulled the zip down her front and let it fall back… over her breasts (thank you sports bra) and down her arms. His hands helped there, gently brushing the material down and all the while Oliver’s face was pressed against her own where Dig couldn’t see him.

It wasn’t any kind of a shock.

Diggle just felt for the image. The sight of a man who loved a woman in a way he’d never loved another. And as such had no freaking clue that he actually did love her like that at all.

At least he hadn’t before…
But seeing Oliver push his cheek into hers, take a breath and sigh, see his head pull back slightly so that his eyes could look into her face and then close as his nose nudged, in what Diggle had to describe as very lovingly, into smooth skin he had to wonder.

“Dig.”

He almost jumped, as if in guilt, at the low tone but moved forwards anyway, placing the supplies beside her as Oliver lowered her prone form back down. But-

“Dig.”

Dig blinked at Oliver, frowning at the time. It sounded almost apprehensive.

Oliver’s hands weren’t touching Felicity’s face but they were beside her on the bed, braced against the mattress. He hadn’t moved his knee yet. “Open her eyes.”

His tone brooked no argument so Diggle moved forwards and, practiced but so very softly – *I’m going to take care of you* – Dig pressed the tips of his fingers over her lids brought them up-

“Fuck!” He swore and moved back, too horrified to care. “God damn it.” *How?* His eyes blazed into the man before him.

But Oliver stayed just where he was. He didn’t move. Didn’t speak. He just stared down into the closed eyes.

…and watched the single drop of blood roll from the corner of one eye and down her cheek.
“There’s a reason I said I’d be happy alone. It wasn’t ’cause I thought I’d be happy alone. It was because I thought if I loved someone and then it fell apart, I might not make it. It’s easier to be alone, because what if you learn that you need love and you don’t have it? What if you like it and lean on it? What if you shape your life around it and then it falls apart? Can you even survive that kind of pain? Losing love is like organ damage. It's like dying. The only difference is… death ends. This? It could go on forever.”  

Meredith Grey

Part 7

‘You cannot die until you have suffered the same way that I have suffered, until you have known complete despair.’

‘Suffering’ wasn’t a novel aspect of life for him. He’d gone through five years of it: it no longer scared him. He could deal with it over and over and over again.

…Despair?

This isn’t despair. Not for me.

He’d met despair before, on his journey prior to the ‘Hood’. The ‘Arrow’.

And had discovered that a man’s tether to sanity should never be found in just one place. Like an exposed nerve.

It was too dangerous.

For a man like Oliver, it should never reside within a single person. That much focus… It was unaffordable. With the way he lived, with how he’d learned to love it wasn’t possible, couldn’t be, not ever. Either he made his peace with settling, with appreciating passing comfort and companionship or he travelled down this road, the path of a vigilante expecting and not fearing death, alone.

…Because what if he found that person? What if he started to need her, the one housing his hope?
And found that he liked it. That he felt peace in the placement of his heart inside of hers, when she
didn’t even know that he’d given it to her for safe keeping. When he didn’t even realize just how
much of himself his heart concealed. And any other remnants of love and affection could be
offered, without fear of trauma, to another who could temporarily ease his solitude – who felt just
as he did. Though he would wonder, later, why he and Sara bothered to try with one another,
knowing they loved or were falling for the touch of another. Why they would suffer heart ache just
to avoid the mere idea of something real. Because with the ‘real’ came something more, something
to fail.

‘What if?’

They were the most brutal words in the history of the human language.

They made him not want to stop. To stop… touching her shoulders. And he had stopped. From
glancing upwards, searching for her in any room and looking away before she saw the truth. He
still did that. From dreaming. Sara had muted those dreams – silence but prevented.

Or from simply imagining what it would be like to love and be loved, so completely and utterly.
By her. In a way that only she could love, did love. He’d thought he wasn’t ready for that. Afraid
of it.

Maybe I was wrong.

But… then what if he lost it?

That possibility.

What if it was taken before it had even started? With his heart sealed tightly inside.

How was he supposed to survive that?

‘And you will. I promise.’

So no. This wasn’t despair. He could deal with despair.
This wasn’t even death. Because with death comes an end to the despair, to the suffering.

There was a break somewhere inside him; something shattered and with it, all feeling. It was unmitigated silence. The silence of light. A cold nothing. Nothing but the smooth trail of red down her cheek.

It fit; the red. To him, it fit. *Red pen. Red dress. Red lipstick… God, the red lipstick.* She’d worn red the previous week and it wasn’t Sara’s lips he’d thought of that night.

*Like pure sunshine her hair spread across his bed, around her head; a golden halo of goodness, even though it wasn’t her natural colour. Didn’t matter; she suited it. Made it hers.*

It was all he could see, her face; the pallid skin and the blood. All he could comprehend.

*He’d heard a quote once: ‘worse than despair, worse than the bitterness of death, is hope’. Percy Bysshe Shelley. But what was the next step? What came after the death of hope? Did anybody know? Could anybody help or guide him through this… this, nightmare? This hell. Because he was there right now, in that place, the place worse than hope. Worse than an ‘end’."

Five years held hostage to the whims of more powerful men and women? A cake walk. He’d gladly go through it all again if it meant what had just happened, wouldn’t.

But his mind refused to handle this.

For how could Oliver Queen live in a world without Felicity Smoak? How could the world revolve without Felicity Smoak? It was unthinkable. And though her survival – if, *if* she lived through it - meant his own, she would be forever *not* Felicity.

*‘Five years ago I made a promise. Do you remember? Well I'm here to fulfill it.’*

Slade. He’d kept his promise.
‘See you around kid.’

*He always kept his promises.*

Pain

Pain

Pain

Her other eye wept red tears now. She hadn’t cried before, when she’d had the most right to: it seemed fitting to do so now. Even if she wasn’t aware that she was.

Pain

Pain is relative.

It was why he could no longer fathom reason.

Or sound. Or thought. Or word. Or movement.

Just her. Only her.

In the space of a second, a single numeral that lasted forever, a part of him wished for the very first time, a part of him begged – the part that wasn’t drowning – that he could go back. Go back in time. Not to ‘back before the island’, not to before all the mistakes he’d made, all the failures piled up. Not to before Tommy. Just to a couple of months ago. To the day of his mother’s rally.

The same day he’d slept with Sara in the Foundry.
After his speech, instead of just walking away and letting her do the same he would follow. He would arrive at her door. And ask her to let him in. In every way. If she did, if she said ‘yes’, then he would touch her, would hold her close. He would say all the words without saying anything at all. Before kissing her. Tasting her. Inhalng her sounds. Before worshipping her. Before letting his fingers do the walking and the talking for him. He would imprint in his mind how she would look in her underwear as he lost the shackles of his own clothes. He would allow himself to fall to his knees and to travel the hidden places of her body. Her hands and touch, each gasp and whisper of his name would mark him for life.

He would kiss her feet, feet that took the brunt of a full work day and night at the Foundry in heels that did amazing things for her legs as he took off her shoes. Would cup her toned calves as her shins stroked fire across his biceps, his mouth busy caressing her thighs, her fingers in his hair...

He knew, he knew, instinctively that the press of his naked chest against hers would feel like love. That the sweep of her hair against his forearms would be as stimulating as her tongue on him. That sliding into her, because he wouldn’t be able to help it as he held her aloft in his arms, would feel like home. Knowing that each movement she’d make would be the right one for him. He’d imagined it – of course he had - fantasized it, what it would be like, how she’d look, how much he’d give of himself. That each thrust would feel like breaking, but breaking of the best kind. And when they would inevitably climax it would leave them so exhausted, so satisfied, so comforted that they would descend to the ground together to sleep – naked and entwined – behind the couch.

With the morning would come pancakes – he’d make them for her, still naked with her watching him in wonder. The same way he’d be watching her. And they wouldn’t find it in themselves to leave each other.

Could he just do that? Please?

The perfect night. The perfect day. The perfect life. The right girl.

All he ever wanted.

Everything he would never get.

It was understandable really that as the picture, the dream, left him his mind did too.
He isn’t moving.

It was from a place of horror that Diggle watched, feeling so emotionally overwhelmed that he wondered how he could even wonder about anything at all, as Oliver just… knelt there.

Not moving.

Other things were blaring alarm bells in his skull; things like, *oh I don’t know – how about, what the hell are we going to do?!* They’d have ten times the luck they’d usually scored when Roy had been administered with Mirakuru and truth be told Diggle was still very wary of the lad. The kid had a good heart but was reckless, impulsive and passionate. Add a miracle drug which enhances every powerful emotion, which in someone like Roy meant the dangerous enhancement of his aggression and his fear, and you had a powder keg waiting to go off.

He couldn’t even try to imagine Felicity on the stuff.

But what was killing him was the fact that there was a 70% chance that she was already dead.

And he didn’t possess the courage to check her pulse right now.

The moment he’d seen the blood he’d spun on Oliver, a resounding ‘why’ screaming through his brain and hoping ridiculously that the man would have some sort of answer, some kind of plan or at least an explanation. All he could hear was white noise, which was alien for him. Afghanistan had taught him how to rationalize, compartmentalize and how to move forwards with a level of calm deficient for most individuals present in hostile environments.

But now he felt so very inadequate to the task. His only thought was that the bottle blonde IT sweetheart, one of the three closest people to him on the planet, could now be dead.

He felt it all: the blazing anger, the painful sorrow, and the worst kind of hope – hope that she’d be okay and that they’d find a way through all this, together and intact.
And Oliver. Wasn’t. Doing. Anything.

“Oliver.” Having stumbled away from Felicity in the general horror of the moment Dig hadn’t yet moved closer than the clear foot of space between him and the bed. “How did she get dosed? We had eyes on her the whole time!” Not the whole time. Not close enough.

And now there she lay. The same bed Oliver hadn’t left yet, still rooted in place. With one knee resting between her thighs, a foot on the floor, body leaning over hers, and both hands braced beside her head and he just… stared down at her face.

John couldn’t even hear him breathe and realized, after looking hard enough, that Oliver wasn’t breathing. Come on man; I need you here. Hovering over her like he was, no one else would have seen or felt it, but Diggle knew that to touch him right now would end badly. “Oliver…”

“No.” It was a hoarse whisper and even less of a surprise to Dig then him finding Oliver with his hands down Felicity’s (Oliver’s, before she lay claim to it) hoodie with the intention to not cop a feel.

As if his body finally remembered it needed breath, Oliver choked on the end of a word that didn’t quite make it to the surface. He shuddered and what Diggle could see of his face, his expression was tight, the muscles in his jaw and cheekbones laced with anguish. Eyes that had been wide and unblinking were now closed; shut tightly against the wave of feeling Dig figured had to be hurting him.

No, this is not the time for you to fall apart. Do you see me closing off? Not here partner, not now. Clenched in his bed sheets, Oliver’s knuckles were white.

There was a whimper, something Dig wouldn’t have ever imagined using to describe Oliver in any particular way. A garbled clatter that sounded despairingly close to, please... And then everything just stopped for Dig.

Because he could see a solitary wet drop of liquid slowly travelling down Oliver’s face. And a noise suddenly tearing free from Oliver that could only be described as inhuman, made him flinch.

Not a roar of anger or a growl. It was closer to a scream. A back bending, claw into your own scalp and tear off your skin, scream. It pushed out of him like a punch and hit John straight in the chest: Oliver screaming. Not yelling vehemently or shouting in frustration. A scream of blinding misery.
Like the howl of a dying wolf. A *howl*; that fit better.

Dig didn’t need to see Oliver’s face to understand this. And that was when he figured it all out:

If Felicity died, or if she was already dead, then John was completely screwed.

A shudder shot through Oliver and Dig was surprised that it didn’t shatter him into little pieces with how tightly he clung to the duvet, with how taught and tense every muscle in his body obviously was. As if locked in place by his personal demons. *I know what that’s like.* Fingers that had dealt death blows now loosened as Oliver’s hands travelled inwards, sliding through blonde hair and folding into the locks. A great gasp of air had Oliver falling forwards, bowing, as if in slow motion. As if he were being pulled and was subsequently trying to hold back, until his forehead pressed against Felicity’s neck.

*Oliver…*

Brown eyes took in the Arrow as he tried as hard as he possibly could to keep it together, to not fall further.

*Why didn’t you just tell her?*

He had originally thought that Oliver had no clue to just how much he cared for his Girl Wednesday and Friday, that maybe his feelings for a certain pretty bird had blinded him to something great and meaningful. But now it was obvious, tragically so. Unbelievably clear. Oliver dating Sara had never been about needing to be near the one who held his heart, had never been about falling in love and staying close to a woman who could potentially be ‘home’. It had been about creating a shield against the mere possibility of a full life.

He’d settled.

To a man like Oliver, nothing was as terrifying as gaining everything and all that entailed, only to lose it. And as young as he is, he had lost a great deal already. His father. His best friend. His innocence. Nothing was more perilous or as permanent as allowing himself to freely fall into the right ‘someone’ and entrusting her with all that he is. Choosing to live.

Sara Lance was a warrior; an assassin created to last. She could handle brute force, could take a
beating and dish it in excess. But she was the safe bet. And she kept secrets. She hid things and she viewed the world in a fashion even more dismal than Oliver ever had. And it allowed the pair to be close, yet remain at arm’s length. It made Dig remember a short conversation several weeks before…

He huffed and parked his behind. Standing and stitching weren’t talents handled well when the cut being stitched was on his own thigh.

But maybe it helped being on a lower level. With Oliver twirling both kali sticks as he cooled down it was easy for the man to miss that he was being watched. Or at least it was to Dig’s wishful thinking.

“You’re staring.”

Damn. A smile broke free of its own accord. The man wasn’t even looking at him. “Eyes on a swivel.”

“Yep.”

“So…” Looking him over, John alternated between talking and suturing. “Are you going to tell me?”

As Oliver finally turned to him, Dig saw him frown. “Tell you what?”

“Why the super-fast hook up with a certain Canary.”

Sure, it was taking advantage of the empty lair, a precedent he’d missed of late seeing as how it had been jam packed with bodies from Roy to Sara, him, Felicity and Oliver. Three wasn’t a crowd; three was perfect. Three was a trinity of trust and it was taking longer than Dig would like to admit for him to get used to the change in dynamics.

And there had definitely been a change.

The resulting silence wasn’t suffocating or telling, nor was the way Oliver contemplated – sucking
in his lower lip as he placed the sticks on the med table. He inhaled and quirked his head. “Super-fast?”

Seriously? “Like a bull man.”

“You think so?”

Dig just looked at him and waited.

A deep exhale from Oliver followed and he looked away, back down towards the sticks. “Right place, right time.”

That got an eyebrow raise. Really? “That’s it?”

“Expecting something else?” Oliver’s tone was curiously passive.

A profound declaration of intent to love, honour and keep her…? No, that would be asking way too much. “Maybe something more.”

The breathy laugh that left his friend sounded more resigned than anything else. “Me and Sara…” Oliver shook his head. “It isn’t complicated.”

Dig frowned. “Simplicity isn’t all it’s cooked up to be.”

Picking up a stick Oliver flipped it, examining the texture. “I don’t exactly have a lot of choice.”

Wow, romantic. “Is that something you’re telling yourself to keep you from doing something else… or from going after someone else?”

Taking the other stick – obviously Oliver found them really interesting, an affair between Oliver and his stick - Oliver moved to place them back in their plastic holders. “Something you’re trying to ask Dig?” He asked over his shoulder.
“Just surprised is all.” And a little disappointed. Tying off the thread Dig pressed a sanitised rag to the bleeding, but now closed wound: it was always the smallest ones that bled the most. “I didn’t think you’d wander back down the path of another Lance sister after deciding the first one was off the board.”

“Would you rather I be alone?”

Loaded. Watching Oliver move about the foundry, confusingly energetic yet listless as he touched and prodded an arrow head here, a cabinet there Dig sighed. “Are you happy?”

With how wide Oliver’s eyes became as quickly looked up, Dig figured he hadn’t expected that response at all. “Happy?”

John just blinked. “With Sara.”

His mouth opened, an ‘oh’ on his lips. “…Yeah.” He let out another breath, eyes travelling somewhere away from the foundry. “I missed her. It’s good. Nice.”

Nice?

John wanted to stare. Sara and ‘nice’ weren’t exactly words Diggle could associate with the leather clad badass. Sexy maybe. Gorgeous. Looks and personality that made you’re eyes follow her around the room. Enticing. Amazing. Lyla was John’s ‘be-all and end-all’ but that didn’t mean he didn’t have a pair of eyes on him. Dig knew what he really wanted to hear from his friend and he had a feeling that no matter how hard he pushed he wouldn’t’ get it.

Oliver wasn’t ready.

Not for the word ‘perfect’.

For John, Lyla was perfect. Sara didn’t equal perfect for Oliver.
She was another Helena. Another Roy. Another ‘attempt’.

But maybe this attempt would help the man grow instead of returning back once again to the hapless vigilante he’d been for months prior to his re-return from Lian Yu. “Right.”

“Right.” Oliver only looked more confused, part of him understanding that he’d completely missed the pointed meaning hidden in Dig’s words.

And he’d continued to. At the time Oliver either hadn’t understood or he hadn’t wanted to.

Admittedly his relationship with Sara Lance was a healthier alternative to the purely toxic mess he’d gone through with Laurel. It was better than the bloody road Helena almost led him on, one he almost let himself be dragged down. Better than the fake relationship he’d shared with Officer McKenna or the quick fling – yes he’d known about it and had decided that demonic possession was the only excuse he’d take as to why it had happened at all – he’d fallen into with Isabel.

Their boy was learning. His training of Roy, his relationship with Sara, they were symbols.

Signs of taking chances. But as much as he’d grown he still held steadfast to his overall assumption that he only deserved a particular type of life. A hopeful Oliver that tried as hard as he could to not be hopeful. The boy had serious issues.

Being male and in a healthy relationship himself had helped Diggle to also see that Oliver hadn’t trusted any of the women he’d slept with. His list of female accomplishments was like a résumé of bad choices.

If he’d loved and trusted Laurel the way he’d been lying to himself that he had, he’d have told her. Everything. From the very start. But something inside him had warned him off. Which was good seeing as how swiftly the woman, up until a couple of months ago, had managed to make Oliver the cornerstone of blame for everything in her life.

He’d tried to trust Helena, because they were similar. But he’d shared too much of himself and the consequences had been severe.
His only mistake with McKenna was getting involved with her in the first place; a woman whose job was to hunt him down. A woman who only recently had managed to walk without aid.

Isabel. Enough said.

And Oliver didn’t trust Sara.

Not really. Not in the way you’re supposed to trust the woman you’re with. Even if it’s only a little at a time. True they shared every physical part of themselves, from the scars and the sparing, to the sex. But that stuff, the surface level stuff… the satisfaction with that didn’t last long. Oliver Queen was a man of deeper waters than most realised. John knew him and therefore knew exactly what Oliver wanted.

He wanted to go to a woman who loved him completely and feel at home, simply by being near her. By standing next to her. By being ‘found’ inside her orbit and by seeing that she too was pulled into his. That she needed and wanted him there. Just because. Gravity.

Love, trust, hope, and belief. No expectations. No pedestals. They were the requirements that Oliver needed and didn’t quite get with Sara. Nor she with him. Their arguments concerning Roy, concerning Helena, concerning Slade – the way they constantly seemed to backtrack to Sara’s overriding instinct to kill and how she didn’t approve of ‘Ollie’s’ reserve. A reserve she should have respected given that it was created in honour of a dead man. And in honour of a living person.

A friend.

A woman who once told him that he could be better, not because he was already worse and needed to improve, but because he was already doing good things… and had the potential to be great. To be more. To be something else. Because she believed.

A woman called Felicity Smoak.

A woman who Oliver had maintained a safe distance from since they’d all returned from Moscow. It was ridiculous to Diggle that Oliver thought he wouldn’t notice. Wouldn’t see the shift in behaviour. Even the way he looked at her had changed, had intensified and, as if he’d realised just before something could happen, Oliver had backed off. Had given in to Sara.
But seeing this, seeing Oliver literally break down and cry into her chest, his ear now against her heart… if she died, if she was dead…

John wouldn’t be able to lift Oliver back up again. He’d fall. He’d want to fall. And if Diggle stood in his way Oliver would kill him, conscience be damned. He knew because in a theoretical scenario, if Oliver stood in his way, tried to stop him from wrecking retribution on the person responsible for taking Lyla away from him, he’d put a bullet in his brain.

Then he’d get his vengeance. It would end with his gun his own mouth, thinking of thick brown hair, soft sky blue eyes and a heart shaped face.

*But the difference between me and Oliver? A lot more people would die in between. There’d be no stopping him.*

“…Dig.”

Brought back to the here and now Diggle blinked, sucking in a breath when the reality of what happened hit him full in the stomach. Felicity. Mirakuru. Oliver.

“John.”

It hadn’t been shouted it like he had done downstairs; it was quiet. But the way Oliver hissed his name made every hair on Dig’s arms stand to attention. His brows furrowed in concern, he swallowed. “What is it?”

Slowly, so slowly, Oliver raised his head, eyes focused down on Felicity’s sleeping face. Taking him in John would be surprised if anyone on the planet, mother and sister included, could guess that he spent his night shooting Arrows in bad people. He looked haggard, eyes red raw but that was nothing compared to the absolute desolation marring the muscle structure of his face.

Then he whispered four words that made John want to throw up.

“Her heart just stopped.”
I’m begging you.

“Felicity.”

In the past, having three adults – including himself, a vital element - alone in his bedroom, would have been the perfect segue, one to not so innocent ventures for Oliver. But years later, in the here and now; sex, Sara and Tommy were the furthest things from his mind.

I don’t care. I don’t care anymore. About any of it. Playboy, stealer, saint, sinner, vigilante; who gives a fuck?

Because Felicity was technically dead, had been technically dead in his arms and all he’d managed to do was stare at her.

In a fight, in battle, I can’t help but react at a speed almost supernatural to my foes. And yet now, when it counts I freeze. What a joke.

“COME ON!”

Wake up.

“What do we do? Oliver?!”

Press. Press. Press. “I-I… I don’t- I don’t know what…” Words were escaping him and he didn’t know why. Didn’t know their point.

It isn’t working. I’m trying and nothing’s happening.
Hands overlapped, his fingers knotted together so tightly his knuckles felt bruised, he pushed and pushed; the muscles in his arms exerting, pumping energy though him and into her as he hoped, prayed, that one of the shoves would open her eyes. He put all of himself into that focus.

Dig was faring only a little better than him.

Elbows leaning on top of the mattress, Diggle was holding Felicity’s head steady. Watching it shift with each of Oliver’s firm presses had hurt to watch. “Come on Felicity.” He gently kissed her forehead.

Hearing the words ‘her heart just stopped’ had caused him to momentarily loose his own head. After bustling and making his way closer to her, anxiously checking her heart beat - checking the flow of air through her nostrils and coming up frighteningly empty - he’d raced into Oliver’s bathroom, pathetically searching for a non-existent miracle cure. Knowing there was nothing he could do. Eventually he’d simply fallen to the floor beside her prone form, watching Oliver, who’d started trying to save her life with relentless resolve the moment Dig jumped up, do his work. What else could he do?

Oliver couldn’t look at him. Didn’t want to see the turmoil there. The resignation. She was going to live. She had to. She must.

So he dug deep, pushing harder.

Work with me.

The muscles in Dug’s face stiffened, eyebrows furrowing together in worry and fear; the expensive four poster bed was actually starting to creak from the strain. “Oliver, maybe-”

“No.”

“Oliver-”

“It won’t matter if she dies.” Oliver’s voice didn’t even sound familiar anymore: short, abrupt, quiet, fragile. “And if she lives she’ll heal fast.” He moved faster. Wide eyes looked into brown as if trying to convince him. “She’ll be fine.”
She’ll be fine.

Something inside Dig was starting to hurt, like a part of him had started dying without permission. “What did you do with Roy, when he was injected?” He needed facts, something to rationalise.

Panic trickled into Oliver’s throat as sweat did the same down his spine. He kept harsh compressions reigning over her chest, her heart. “Roy just… he came through it-he…” Press, press, press. **Press.** “He just… woke up.”

And Felicity wasn’t waking.

*Please*

*PLEASE*

*Crack!*

“Jesus, Oliver!” Halfway to standing, Dig tried to force Oliver’s hands to stop moving. “That was her rib just now-”

“Wait!”

Freezing in place Dig glared hard at him. But with a hand next to Oliver’s and another against her face, he could feel it. A heartbeat. Felicity was breathing. She was alive.

A heavy breath if relief rushed out of him and he laughed weakly. “Oh thank **god.**”

But Oliver didn’t move. He just panted. Eyes closed. And his hands moved to brace against the mattress.

...**She’s alive.**
The silence felt oppressing.

Before… in the room… with her… Felicity…

The blood pumping throughout his body, the hypersensitivity of his panic, Dig’s frantic movements, his own heartbeat loud in his ears, her heartbeat strong against his hands - hands hot and trembling - thoughts almost vibrating out of him… the noise had been everywhere. Inescapable.

No wonder he was still shaking.

She died.

She died and then she came back.

He felt ill. And he wanted back in the room. Hadn’t wanted to leave. He wanted to be close when she woke. To feel more of that peace that kept ‘happening’ upon him when he was near her.

But Dig wouldn’t have it. Said I looked like hell, that I needed a break. He’d glared at him for that one, not dignifying it with a response as Dig deliberately avoided talking about the fact that their closest friend was now enhanced with Mirakuru. Said I needed sleep. Oliver hadn’t even looked at him. Said Thea needed me. Knowing Thea was downstairs drinking Cocoa with his mother – Dig had briefly left the room to check on them and sooth any questions they had - he’d opted to ignore his friend and simply watch the hypnotic rise and fall of Felicity’s chest. If Dig wanted me to sleep he could have just left me in there. He’d have fallen unconscious in seconds. But then Dig spoke the magic words.

“How do you think Felicity would feel seeing you like this when she wakes?”

Diggle knew him well.
So about an hour later he found himself in the hallway outside of the drawing room sitting on one of the sofa seats against a window.

Mind blank.

Eyes open and staring into oblivion.

…It had taken him a while to heed Dig, finally shuffling wearily into his own bathroom and pausing in front of the large mirror there, seeing what Dig had meant: he looked drawn. But he didn’t care; not that his forehead was bleeding, or that dirt was on his skin and clothes, that Felicity’s blood caked his fingernails… It was all absently assessed: the rest of him was still in his bedroom.

Yet he’d taken in his hands. He’d stood there with his shirt ripped off to be binned, belt undone, looking at his fingers for several minutes before slowly bringing them to his mouth and sucking off the dried blood. It wasn’t stupid; there wasn’t a chance in hell he’d be infected with Mirakuru. For that to happen the initial point of contagion needed to be directly from the source, not from a secondary host. But that wasn’t the point.

Her blood was on his skin. It wasn’t dirty, it wasn’t unsafe or hazardous or disgusting. It was Felicity. Her blood. He didn’t want to wash it off like he would his own sweat, like he would the bodily fluids of an arms dealer or a drug baron. Something undesirable. No, he wanted to respect and care for each and every part of her. She’d gained those injuries by putting her own life on the line - in doing a good deed - had bled for him, an act he could never repay her for and never wanted it to become ‘paid’. It was theirs now. It couldn’t be lost. Between him and her. Just them. There was something markedly intimate about that. And Oliver wouldn’t deny that taking in even a small portion of what made up the perfectly shaped genius, just a dried patch of blood from her shoulder, fulfilled a baser instinct.

The instinct to connect.

Was that wrong? Should he have asked permission? Why did he feel the need in the first place?

It was dangerous.

Pity he’d stopped caring.
He felt as if something inside him had finally fallen into place and it was as confusion as it was frightening.

After showering he’d changed into sweats and a t-shirt, letting loose a heavy breath when he realised Felicity could use one too. He’d do it himself but that would be overstepping a line. Didn’t matter how much he figured she’d appreciate not being covering in dry blood, leaves and dirt – friends didn’t undress friends and wash them as they slept. Didn’t matter that he’d wanted to. That buried feelings were rushing to the surface from where he’d locked them up tight. Instead he’d offered the use of his on-suite restroom to Dig but the man had refused. He’d changed clothes during his rendezvous with Lyla.

Neither knew when she’d wake.

Eyeing the surrounding upholstery now didn’t help, nor did the memories each pass of his eyes forced him to recall urge him to think about something other than the events of the night. In fact, specific memories of what had once happened in the mansion just forced him to confront all he could have lost tonight. If it weren’t for Felicity. His body was motionless against the cushioned seat but his hands betrayed him: clenched against his thighs as they were.

He needed her to wake.

It had been different with both Roy and Slade. He explained to Dig (as they’d wiped her face free of blood) how fast Slade had taken to the drug, how his heart had stopped beating, but only for a few minutes. Like with Felicity. He’d woken in a haze of emotion… in understandable circumstances… that had ended in deaths. Roy had been slightly different. He too had woken after a few minutes but he’d gone back to sleep immediately for several hours.

*Her heart stopped.*

Part of him couldn’t get past it, kept coming back to it. *Her heart stopped. I promised to protect her. Less than two years ago I promised John that I – we - could protect her.*

His fell back against the window: jaw clenched and tried hard to repress each little nuance of emotion. Y how much his lungs were burning from the effort involved, he figured he wasn’t succeeding.
He didn’t take in how the dimly lit area he sat in cast curious looking shadows on the walls, couldn’t decipher the low mumbling of words between his sister or mother or how he’d unconsciously been unable to steer himself away from them, his next choice if he couldn’t stay upstairs. He’d been in to see them; they’d hugged and cried and smiled but it didn’t matter right now. Nothing registered.

Except when his mobile, resting on the seat next to him started to vibrate.

Immediately he knew who it was.

On the third ring his hollowed blue irises finally flickered to it and stayed there. On the fourth ring he let out a shallow exhale. On the sixth ring he reached for it, swiping his thumb across the screen before putting it to his ear.

And waited.

“Kid.”

He kept his nails short for this very reason; it wasn’t just so that they didn’t get in the way or simply because they’d look ridiculous long. It was because, when angered, when the hot streak of pure loathing flared through him, they wouldn’t tear through his palms when his hands fisted.

He imagined each blunt piercing was an attempt at ripping out Slade’s other eye.

It came out as a low promise. “I want to kill you.” But he wouldn’t: he’d made a decision with Felicity. No killing.

“I see.”

Oliver swallowed. “Why’d you do it?”

“I promised you-”
“You promised you’d ‘make me suffer, as you have suffered’, yeah I got it.” He bit out, feeling as powerless as Slade wanted him too when he heard the man softly laugh. “I’m asking you why you did it. Why her?”

“You already know why.”

He almost bit his tongue. “No I don’t.”

“It’s pitiful that I have to spell these things out for you.” He drawled, his Australian accent coming through as husky and as self-assured as ever. “You should already understand this game.”

Oliver gritted his teeth, every muscle in his body tense and ready to just lay waste to someone, to anything. “Enlighten. Me. Then.”

“Certainly.”

A rising pressure in his chest, a swirling pool of anger and misery threatened to fell him. “Don’t play with me. This isn’t a game.” *Stop hurting the people I love.*

“It is a game. It’s a game of life. Your life. And I plan to make the finale as painful as possible.”

*Stop it.* As weak as he felt he couldn’t hold back the wave as it began to rupture and he closed his eyes tight against the storm, jaw straining. Slade continued, as if he knew Oliver was teetering on the edge of a hopeless abyss. As if he wanted to watch him fall. But not yet.

Not yet.

“I watched you. I’ve been watching you. Analysing your patterns, your movements. Not because I didn’t understand you: I understand you perfectly. The heroism built on a bed of lies and guilt. The moment I heard about the news of a certain green hooded vigilante it was all too obvious. And I remembered… of course I did. Laurel lance.”

It took a moment for Oliver to form words, to get his mouth to move at his will. The effort involved was ginormous and it made his resolve, his determination to be unbreakable, bend
“What about her?”

“Why, she’s the love of your life isn’t she? The woman you longed to see on the island, the only woman who could…” Laughter shouldn’t be haunting, shouldn’t be a signal for fear. “Heal you and those scars of yours. How did that work out for you? You lost her, didn’t you? Even when you had her, you never really had her. Not like you had Shado.”

The reminder, the constant guilt, the name, the memory had Oliver standing, a hand coming down his face to rest over his eyes.

“What is it about Oliver Queen that makes women make bad choices?”

Oliver didn’t say a word. Couldn’t.

“Do you love her Oliver?”

He was going to be sick. “Who?”

Slade’s deep exhale sent a shudder through him. “Laurel. Shado. Sara. Does it even matter with you?”

“I loved Shado.” It was futile to reply, to even try and defend himself however vehemently, but he couldn’t help it and he continued, his voice soft with the pain of it all. “And Laurel. I love Sara…”

“Do you?”

Oliver’s eyes snapped back open. “Yes! You know I do: you saw it on the island.”

“That wasn’t love.”
“Not all love is the same.” He replied, his head moved to and fro, exhausted.

“That’s just another way of saying you didn’t. You never did. I wonder if you’re even capable of being in love with anyone.”

“If it wasn’t love then what was it?”

“Regret.”

The breath Oliver sucked in was more than audible but he couldn’t help it and he swallowed on reflex.

“You cared about her, I did see that. But love? The type of love where one person becomes everything that you are?”

It was like a punch.

“Where their every breath is yours?”

A stab of light so painful it had to be truth, because only the truth was so horrifying.

“The kind I had with Shado? You didn’t have that. You’ve never had that.”

Unbidden, unwanted, and dreaded, the sensation of soft blondness stroked care against his palms. Glasses perched precariously on the bridge of a nose he’d been tempted to tap on occasion shone in the artificial light of the foundry – but never as brightly as those brilliant eyes - as a smile that begged to be kissed every minute, every second, crawled into the space behind his own eyes and refused to leave. When his lids closed, she was right there. Talking quiet words to him, ‘hero’, ‘you’re not alone in this’, ‘yes you can’, ‘you did it’…

I believe in you

…And the thing about belief Oliver? It isn’t just for ‘right now’, or for ‘today’; it’s forever.
It hit him hard, *Oh*, yet so gently - he already knew secretly and that the rest of him had just been waiting for him to catch up - and he sucked in a breath, let it loose as a gasp. For the first time since he’d walked through the mansion his eyes, which had been so filled with turmoil, brightened like a star. Clear. *I get it. I get it now. But I can’t. Everything... I love...* It was a resounding thought.

That everything he loved gets hurt.

*“What do you get?”*

Oliver blinked, coming up short.

*“Finally had that epiphany have you?”*

Slowly, the space between his brows began to furrow.

*“You see in everything that we went through together on the island I never saw you look at Shado or Sara or even the picture of the lover you proved your infidelity with, the same way you looked at her tonight.”*

The fear in his chest was a wad to choke on. Lips pressed together – if only to stop himself from making it worse - he was forced to listen to brutal truth; his eyes a sea of bleak understanding and livid passion: Slade was speaking words that would undo him.

*“She’s your hope. She’s the reason you try so hard to be better. And it wasn’t the exquisite Laurel Lance - the lawyer with something to prove, it wasn’t Shado – the woman you claimed to be love but didn’t, it wasn’t even Sara – the person most capable of understanding just exactly who you are. It was the lowly IT girl you keep in your employ. The one you forget about when Sara Waltz’s into the room and offers sex on the silver platter of the privileged life you were born into. The life a man such as yourself didn’t deserve.”*

*“Stop it.”* Everything in him warred against this voice and it showed aggressively on his features. *“You don’t need to do this.”*

*“Did you even fight to get your company back? Would you fight for her the same way?”*
“I said stop it!”

“WOULD YOU?”

“YES!”

“WHY?”

“BECAUSE I LOVE HER.” He snarled. “AND YOU KNOW THAT! I—” He lost his breath. “I love her, I …I love her.” It was like a release. *Oh God*. “I’m in love with her.”

“Yes.” Yes. “I know.” He knew.

He knew.

Of course he did. And everything in him rebelled. *No, he couldn’t. I tried SO hard…* Knowledge to Slade was a dangerous ally.

“If you’re wondering why the dose of venom didn’t stop me for long,” the abrupt subject change made Oliver sit back down, still reeling, “well, let’s just say there are ways of combating against poison when you’re a vessel of advanced Mirakuru. I took to it in a way that not even the scientists I allowed inspect me – the ones who survived - expected. My body mutated the serum. By will alone it seems.”

More murder. More threat. “What does that even mean?”

“You know that my blood was being used to make replicas of myself.” Slade continued, completely ignoring him. “But what you don’t know is that my blood first had to be filtered. Distilled. Chemical sanitization. In the hopes that it would be easier for the new host’s body to ‘ingest’. It wasn’t very effective. But it did mean that my own personal brand of psychological drive couldn’t be imparted on another. You’re Felicity? She didn’t get a ‘clean’ dose.”
For one excruciating second Oliver’s heart faltered then jerked, the muscles there contracting painfully. He felt it: the strain of his lungs becoming increasingly difficult to tolerate when they weren’t granted their release of oxygen, the painful thump of the protected organ when it finally began to beat again…

The trepidation of what this could mean.

Hot and cold. Seeing red.

They were all marks: pieces of ammo he could and would use to strengthen the raw fire he felt, the urge to hurt this man, to wipe him off the board for good, Mirakuru be damned.

He’d hurt her. He wanted to kill him. So much. Even though he’d promised. Even though he’d decided it didn’t change that one fact. A lash of rage curled inside his core.

“*I stabbed her with the head of the arrow she so bravely shot into my neck.*”

*He stabbed her.* He already knew, had seen the wound… It was enough. **Enough.**

Eyes dark, blue irises contracting in a tight circle around focused black pools of anger, he could almost see Slade; he’d be walking, sauntering, as he gloated and goaded with ease.

“*Tell me… how is she doing?*”

He didn’t shout. “I **am** going to kill you.” Guilt was a sickness his stomach had difficulty tolerating. But his voice was hoarse and the phone in his grasp cracked under the pressure of his grip. “You tried to kill my family: I am going to kill you.”

*I can’t.*

*But I want to.*
Think of Felicity.

“So you say.”

“Either way, I swear to God I’ll stop you.”

“Swear to me.”

“You’re not worth it.”

A bark of laughter echoed down the line. “You’ll be begging me soon enough.”

The dial tone sounded down the line with finality. His face rigid with emotion, he didn’t respond well.

“Ollie!” Thea shouted, stepping out of the lounge in time to see his mobile hit the wall beside her and shatter in tiny little metallic pieces. “Was that necessary?”

He didn’t have it in him – there was nothing in him prepared enough to fend off any more emotion. Taking a breath, feeling somewhat recovered yet so much worse all at once - no hate, no fear, he wasn’t even angry - in an attempt to rid himself of the chaotic mess Slade Wilson always managed to create inside him. But now he was left with an empty exhaustion and he slumped into his seat, face in his hands.

And shuddered.

“That bad huh?” The indulgent lilt to her voice was welcome; a far cry from what he’d expected to receive.

A beat…

“Is Felicity okay?”
“Ollie?”

“...She will be.” He let out another breath; face still pressed into his palms. “I’m sorry Speedy; I just need a minute.”

“Yeah, I got that. Problem is, I don’t think you have a minute.”

His stomach dropped. What now? He let his hands drop and looked up at her. And paused.

She seemed… reluctant? For him. Her voice was quiet, like she thought any sound might hurt him. Her eyes kind. Big; she was worried about him. She loved him. Oliver gazed; he hadn’t seen her look at him like that in a long while. When she took a step forwards her gaze travelled over him as if assessing if he wanted her near.

“Sara’s here.”

Distracted, his mouth opened. Then closed. Sara. His stare flickered down. I thought she’d gone.

Thea must have seen his confusion. “She said Felicity left her a message?” Of course she did, he thought, his soft smile breaking through the disquiet he’d been feeling. “Mom told her it might be best to wait with her in the main room; thought you needed a few minutes.”

Good. A slow sigh left him. A few minutes wouldn’t help; a few hours maybe. Enough time to get his thoughts on track but the last thing he needed now was an agitated Sara Lance on his hands. “Thank you.” He settled further back into the cushions, legs stretched.

An exhale, forced through Thea’s nostrils, had him blinking back to her: it sounded more like a sniff than the amused snort she was probably aiming for. But there was something close to amazement on her face and gratitude laced her tone. “I should be thanking you.”
He was shaking his head before she got the last word out. “Thea, you’re my sister. Mom is ‘mom’. You don’t need to thank me for doing anything.”

As stubborn as her brother, she refused his logic. “But you saved us.”

It was earnestly heartfelt and Oliver couldn’t quite figure why she was imploring him for anything at all. “Felicity saved us.”

“Yes she did.” Nodding as she moved closer, Thea perched on the end of the sofa. “And I’ll thank her properly when she comes down stairs. She took it to a whole new level of badass.” She’d love that, he thought. “But I was talking about the gun. And how well you used it. And it made me wonder…”

Finally she looked at him, big eyes searching his: he attempted the usual shell of calm, but he was so tired and cracks were beginning to show. “Wonder what?”

“If you were the Arrow.”

The silence following her statement was deafening.

He licked his lips, mind horrifyingly blank. “Thea…”

She shook her head but her voice remained quiet. “Don’t lie to me. Not again. We were talking about lies tonight in the car before that psycho kidnapped us. I don’t want to go down that road again. Living through it made me realise that life is precious. I don’t want to be angry at you anymore. I don’t want to be angry at mom.”

Nothing was coming out. Why aren’t I saying anything?

“If you say nothing right now I will take that as an immediate admittance.”

Say something. But his mouth was closed, stunned speechless, his eyes fixed on hers and he knew just how fragile he looked because he felt it. He felt exposed, drained and tired of it all. Initially, his reasoning for not telling the people he cared for just exactly what he did late into the night had
been down to the basic fact that he hadn’t expected to survive the year. Then, as time moved forwards, and as a solitary mission became a team goal his reason became a simple justification for keeping those he loved safe. Thea had been and still was on the very top of that list.

But now? What was his reason? Disregarding the irony of the fact that him keeping secrets to keep her safe had actually put her in further danger, it was instinctive to him to try to protect her. But protecting his sister had led her to distrust him. And honestly he didn’t think he could afford the energy to erect a decent defence or lie against this. He didn’t have the time. Or the will. So his only thought now… was…

Her eyes, so unusual in that though they were blue they were also mistaken for brown and green, were seeing everything, taking in every inch of her brother.

A brother who didn’t want her to hate him. For being the Hood, the Arrow. For being a disappointment. He didn’t want her to see him the way Tommy had, the way Laurel had. As a killer. A murdering vigilante.

*Please don’t hate me.*

The moment slipped silently into a full minute. Into two. Into an eternity where he didn’t breathe, think or try. He just sat and looked at her. And he thought his heart would burst from his chest with how hard it was beating until-

“Thank you.” Her arms were already around him, face pressed into his collarbone. “Thank you so much for all those times you saved me, us.” She held him so tightly and his expression turned slack in shock. “Thank you. Arrow.”

Oliver fought for words but couldn’t find any. Instead he simply held her back. And slowly smiled, a new kind of strength filling him. She’d told him in the police precinct that she no longer believed in him, betrayal etched so deeply in her skin it had hurt the core of his being, before leaving him and their mother in the dust.

The relief at getting that faith back made him dizzy.

“You never need to thank me.”
It was no secret that Oliver didn’t sleep well.

For the past 2 years he’d managed a half-way decent balance between sleep and his pilgrimage as the Arrow. Lian Yu held many horrors: the very idea of a full night of uninterrupted sleep was a mere dream. Like with China, with the ‘hood’, and with his attempt at ‘heroism’ he’d calculated the minimum hours sleep requisite for optimum efficiency was 3 hours, 30 minutes.

Sleeping next to Sara had added an extra 2 hours to that number.

The reappearance of Slade Wilson had knocked that back to a little over 1 hour per night. Nightmares set up camp and refused to leave.

It had been said, to him and to others, that trouble sleeping is often linked firmly to the demons locked within, to the wolves howling at your door and snapping at your heels. In Oliver’s case this was more than a little true. Add that to the very real fear that Slade would kill his family, would hurt Sara deliberately and in such a way that Oliver would never be able to forget or forgive himself and he was surprised he’d slept at all the past few weeks.

Yet it wasn’t his only reason.

Peace was another concept as unreal to Oliver as the idea that the Queen’s Gambit had never sunk in the first place. Since 2007, respite had been carried out with one eye open and waking had always been with the intention to either flee from someone or run towards something else. The prey or the hunter. There was never a moment to let down his guard, never a time to consider just existing. To just sleep. To just be.

*You see how hard I work out?*

Driving his body towards exhaustion had been the only way. Relentless he wouldn’t stop until sweat poured off him, until his muscles shook with the strain. He was lucky he could manage to lie down at all.

And when he woke? Sleeping in, holding the one you love close, basking in the silence… none of it was optional. Not at all. He’d found it impossible. His body, his mind wouldn’t allow for it.
In all this he was different from Sara.

Sara had managed to find the correct stability between guilt and reason; where he was too burdened by the sins of his past, she’d embraced them. She knew she was an assassin, knew that some of the things she’d done were horrific but she’d also come to terms with the killer within. She accepted, in a way he’d never been able to, that bad things happen to good people, that worse should happen to bad people but that good and bad aren’t black and white and that sometimes what is right isn’t always easy. But even in his first days as the Hood, Oliver had never shown that same cold calculus that she possessed in easy spades: that the easiest way of riding yourself of a problem was to eradicate it.

She may have been sleeping with him… but she was too much like Nyssa to be thinking of anyone other than her.

So whenever he woke, they never woke together. He didn’t know how to sleep in anymore.

The point? It wasn’t that late; barely two in the morning. The Queen family weren’t novices in the art of using every hour between midnight and dawn, since he himself did his best work at night, as Thea managed Verdant and his mother slept when she wished. Every member of the household was currently wide awake.

All Oliver wanted to do right now was rest.

But he couldn’t. He still hadn’t spoken to Lance. Their driver had been murdered tonight. He had family. It needed to be fixed.

And Sara...

Avoidance wasn’t his intention. They needed to talk. Problem was that whenever they tried to talk to each other about any subject that floated past the line of surface level bullshit they tended to argue. Like they had with Helena, with Roy. And he knew that they would now, with Felicity.

He really want to go there. She wouldn’t like what she’d find.
Like Laurel, Sara still saw ‘Ollie’. It didn’t matter that they’d both changed, that they’d both suffered on the island; their relationship was based on the past, on the people they used to be. He’d ignored it. So had she. Looking back on it now he felt like a fool. Thinking that it would be enough. That it would hold them together.

And he thought the same thing now, looking at her standing there. In the lounge. A frown of guarded expectation marred his features, making him look more than a little wearisome. His hands were limp by his sides, his voice lax but not delicate.

“Why are you here Sara?” He breathed.

*Why’d you come back?*

His tone wasn’t accusing; far from it. But he knew Sara. He understood her. Once she made a decision she’d do what he would have once done; she’d up and leave. She’d run, dragging the past behind her like the moaning chains of burden into the present where they’d drive her actions through the future. “You made it clear that…”

*You made it clear that you thought we were toxic. Just like it was with Laurel.* Sometimes he’d wondered if he’d ruined the Lance sisters: not to sound overly conceited but it wasn’t a coincidence when a relationship with both sisters ends with an admittance as painfully true as ‘we’re toxic together’.

Not wanting to return to the man he used to be, the one who killed without regret - or even the selfish playboy who used a business trip as an excuse to cheat - letting Sara walk away, as painful as it he would admit it had been… it had also been a relief.

*She’d been right.* Their objectives weren’t the same, weren’t even close to being the same. That didn’t make her bad and him good; it just made them too opposing. Not opposites that synchronise to create that perfect stability between two people that Oliver only knew about because he’d read about them. Opposing forces that hurt each other.

Oliver waited for Sara to reply.

She still stood there all shield and purpose; leather jacket unzipped, arms crossed over chest, sad eyes looking him over. “Are you okay?”
“Am I…?” A breathless laugh left him but one carrying zero humour. *Are you kidding me? “That’s what you’re leading with right now?”*

Those eyes entreated him and for someone so lethal, she really did have the most amazingly pretty and doe-like eyes. “Ollie…”

*Darn it.* Regretting his tone, he took a metaphorical step back. “I’m sorry.”

He wasn’t angry at her; there was no reason to be. He just wanted her to answer a question for once with an actual answer. They’d been dating for a couple of months yet just a couple of hours after their break up and that was all it took for Sara to be right back to the way she’d been – the way they’d both been - when she’d first arrived in Starling. Answering questions with more questions.

It was her security. Her way of managing emotion.

She hadn’t changed.

But he had.

When he spoke again his words barely audible. “I’m fine. It isn’t me I’m worrying about.”

“Your mom? Thea?”

“They’re fine. For the most part.” He licked his lips. “Slade tried to kill them tonight.”

Part of him was still in disbelief so it came out as more of a croak. Sara looked stunned, as if she didn’t expect the maniac to make such a bold move. “Oh my God, Ollie.” Her arms fell from their rigid hold of each other. “What happened?”

And everything quietened inside him, as if just her name made the world still to a beautiful halt. “Felicity.”

Spoken like a statement of fact.
“What?” She didn’t get it. Of course she didn’t. The furrow on the bridge of her nose told a story.

“He had us.” Standing still made him feel more restless but the idea of sitting down again was worse. So he began to pace. “Slade overturned our car: killed the driver. I was with Mom and Thea and they were so scared Sara. He was going to kill them and they knew it.” The forefinger and thumb of his left hand rubbed together, the nervous gesture he’d denied to Dig of ever having. “He wanted me to choose.” Swallowing down the return of that desolate feeling and ignoring how his voice sounded because of it – coarse, low, overcome – his eyes sought Sara’s. Deep blue against faraway blue. “And he pointed a gun to their heads.”

Softer than he’d ever heard her, Sara spoke. “I’m so sorry.”

“But then she just came round the corner,” he shook his head, a fragile smile on his face, “and I swear Sara, I’ve never been that terrified.”

“You mean… Felicity?” Her eyes flickered over him, trying to piece together the fragments but his were no longer on her.

For that matter his eyes weren’t even open; his palms scrubbed over his 2am shadow until both hands slid behind his neck.

“What did she do?”

A jerk of his head turned him further away. “She shot him.”

“She… she what?”

“She shot him.” In the neck. Twice. “An arrow filled with Tibetan Pit Viper venom.”

“Did it work?”

There was something in her tone that should have made him pause but his mind was elsewhere.
“Did you know Felicity could use a crossbow?” Head tilted, he turned to face her again; an inquisitive pull to his brow, eyes narrowed.

The abrupt tangent caught her by surprise: he couldn’t blame her. “I-I had no idea.”

Oh. Why did he want to know so badly?

“Ollie.” Confused by his seemingly distracted state she moved closer to him, compassion seeping out of her like a wave. “Have you gotten any sleep?”

A crick in his neck loosened when he shook his head. “No. Not yet. I can’t.”

“Why-”

“I don’t want to Sara.” He whispered.

Not until Felicity wakes.

Knowing how Oliver was when confronted by dreams, nightmares Sara knew better than to judge, than to push.

Instead she reached for him, touching his arm, her face suddenly intent on his. “Is Slade dead?”

What? His eyes narrowed, her manner throwing him off. “Sara?”


Something in him went deadly still.

Blue versus blue.
“No.”

_Not like that. Not the way you want me to._

Bird-like something in her face twitched, her eyes switching swiftly from intention to disbelief. She stared up at him, like she just couldn’t grasp the solitary word. “Why?” The brittle scrape to the word told him exactly what her opinion of his choice was.

‘...Everything that has ever happened to you, everything you’ve ever had to do, on the island or before then. Or after. None of it justifies allowing Slade Wilson or anyone else to ruin your soul. _No one on the planet has the right to twist another person._’

Didn’t mean he wasn’t tempted but…

“...Because I made a choice.”

Sara’s eyes snapped shut, jaw clenched and she dropped the hand currently gripping his arm like a steel bind. She sucked in a deep breath.

“You had him and you let him live.” Her eyes opened suddenly.

She looked so disappointed. Angry. Confused. Defiant. He understood, he really did.

He just wasn’t in the mood.

“You weren’t there.” Each word was pushed out of gritted teeth.

“Explain it to me then.”

So I know this ended without a specific Olicity scene but the chapter turned out to be longer than I originally planned. It's possible that the final Chapter may be split into two now. Oh and don't expect the next one to be up for a few weeks; I'm working on chpt 4 of True Face: Beautiful Crime and I want to take my time with it. Hope you enjoyed :)}
Part 8

Chapter Notes

I know it's been FOREVER! To anyone who's still reading it, thank you! Okay so... you know this story was only supposed to be a one shot. I got really carried away. Anyway: I hope you like this one just as much as I do because, with as ludicrous this past month has been for me, I had to steal precious nuggets of time this week to complete it. I wrote part of it in December when I was ill then scrapped it because it sounded... not me. But I was ill so... Please tell me what you think :) 

What wouldn’t I do… for the right guy. **Julie Owen, Practical Magic**

Part 8

*Don’t freak out*

She fell away. Fathom’s deep, to the marshes of her subconscious.

Dark.

Deep, a heartbeat.

Alone.

*Don’t freak out*

The recess; the place you’re not supposed to remember you visit when you’re unconscious. Where she couldn’t hear or feel, or see, taste and touch. Or fear.

But she still knew. Still understood. She waited. She’d told him, you see.

And wondered who it was she was trying to soothe: him or her?

…

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

I’m begging you

This voice, one that wasn’t supposed to be there, here, echoed through her...

COME ON

Quiet. For too long. She’d been still; it was a strain to think, but there was nothing there. Nothing to see, nothing to touch, to feel…… yet this voice was coming through; a faint murmur, sometimes a whisper, others a distorted scream.

Felicity

His voice.

A whisper in the air… a ripple in the water… as if coming from a great distance.

It was the first of anything new. Deep in the black. An anchor in the place she’d been pervaded in.

Felicity… please

How am I… hearing this? It reverberated through her, calling her back, calling her home.

Felicity
She was too deep in the dark for words to form on her lips. She wasn’t ready yet, wasn’t finished.

*It isn’t working. I’m trying and nothing’s happening.*

…Oh.

*Wake up*

She was dying. *This is what happens when... oh, I was so hoping I’d be strong enough.*

*Work with me*

*Always:* she knew his voice with an intimacy that shouldn’t exist, not when he wasn’t hers. But it was too late a thing to change now and his tone told her just how far gone he was. How close he was to truly breaking down. *Oliver.*

*Please*

*Since you asked me.*

She hadn’t known her heart had stopped beating until it started to race once again; a heavy, pounding drum in her chest. *My heart stopped. It actually stopped. And Oliver made my heart start again; of course he had. He’d been there the whole time.* She was so far beyond sorry about that; he’d suffered again… *because of me.*

She’d tried so hard to make sure that would never happen. That he wouldn’t suffer – ever - because of her. And now, here he was; *suffering.*

*It’s okay Oliver. I’m okay. It’s all going to be okay. This is nothing.*
Later, an eternity or maybe only a second after the fact… she started to feel. A *physical* sensation.

**It.**

*Oh... God.*

The *lightning.* The *burn.* That’s what it felt like. *It hurts.* A heat that should have left her far behind by now.

The Mirakuru?

It started as an itch would; irritating but adaptable. Until it suddenly flared; a red pulse of pain, never ending as it writhed through her blood, from her heart to her head. A constant blister in her veins blinding out light and sound and function. Hot. Demanding. Powerful. A juggernaut. Unstoppable. *Alien.*


It terrified her. And it shouldn’t. Not here, in this place without dreams but drowning in cognition. Here she should have been amazingly without fear. But the fear came anyway and would still come. Later. Would arrive hand in hand with awareness, would find a home within her. Comprehension was formed on the anguish of it. Of knowing she was changing, of knowing how much it would affect the people she cared deeply for. She’d try so hard not to let it show.

And fail.

Endurance; she couldn’t move, couldn’t scream as it scorched – the sting of conception - couldn’t cry when she realised the tingling and the ‘scratching-under-her-skin’ sensation was the transmogrification of her own blood cells; a minute happening that no one but her could see or know, creating something to become ‘more’ from ‘less’.
Felicity had *never* minded being *less*.

Too bad she hadn’t been given a choice in the matter…

…

Contrary to popular opinion – Roy’s and Sara’s – Felicity’s mind did not function like clockwork.

There was no intricate series of perfect bends and lifts, no roads with perfectly fitted and appropriated road signs with which to navigate the computer inside her mind. No…

It was chaos in there.

Not unlike a pachinko machine.

And it was chaos in which she did her best work. The unorganised mess, to the undisciplined mind is simply so: a disarray of colour and violence. To Felicity? It was music and peace and logic. The firing of impulses; organic or artificial. The inner workings of a computer were often associated with simplicity; there was a motherboard in which all the components meet, correct? Not quite. And how did they get to become so perfectly structured? By first being so very ridiculously difficult to fathom and unwind.

As was Felicity.

Which often made her wonder how Oliver and Diggle had gotten in so skilfully. So easily.

She couldn’t say it was because they were special because that would that would imply that she thought that she was. And she wasn’t. Not really. Sure, she’s a genius… but anybody can be born with a knack for a particular skill. It just so happened that her talent allowed her to meet, work and love a superhero.

The point?
Right now all those bright lights – electrons and nerves impulses dancing and shooting off – in her brain were focused in a linear progression. *Strictly forward lane* thinking – not *Felicity*. A one way stream. In which she, once again, was forced to stroll down.

And again, *he* was there.

**You aren’t my employee**

*I… remember. I’m his partner.*

**You’re my partner**

*I’m his partner...* she had to admit, all things considered, this wasn’t a bad place to remain for a while.

The darkness - though oppressing - being filled with the soft timbre of Oliver’s ‘Felicity voice’, his masculine cadence, a tone that could never be mistaken for another - to Felicity - provided a sort of balm for the soul. *Like stepping into a warm bath.* It was a soothing sort of lullaby to which she could forget the difficulties and mania of the last 24 hours, where she can forget that she was injected with Mirakuru and was currently turning into a werewolf – *you never know with Japanese labelled, artificially engineered, modified and privatised chemical agents currently swimming in my bloodstream, altering my DNA, which is how I am currently able to supply cognizant thought to my subconscious* – and just... **be.**

Cradled in the acceptance that Oliver had always provided. Even if it wasn’t real; even if it was just an illusion-

**You’re the one she cared for… Take it**

**What?**

**Who’s that?**

**I don’t-**
-A green hood, one frayed from the elements and overuse flashed too vibrantly to be anything less than a treasured thought, a memory before it disappeared again-

Who else was there – here – with her? With me. These images were not hers-

**Let’s see how the kid deals with this**

*Oh no. She was brought to a stop. Slade. This was Slade. Why is he here? He shouldn’t be here; not in this space. His voice. In her headspace. Where it was just ‘Felicity’ and all that balanced her.*

*Slade.*

*That’s Oliver.*

*I swear to God, I’ll kill you*

*No- PAIN hit her like a wave, but it wasn’t her own. More like a repeat; like breathing in another person’s remembrances and the sensations that followed like ghosts behind them.*

**YOU BETTER KILL ME KID**

He wasn’t with her. Not really. *He wasn’t.* This was something else, something… worse? Better?

*Hey Kid.*

*And that was different too: very different. It sounded indulgent. Almost affectionate. And she couldn’t remember having ever heard it herself. Not in life, not her life anyway.*

*I figured you couldn’t save the day without making a mess*
...These aren’t my memories. This isn’t a voice I could have heard...

They were Slade’s. A version of him she’d never met. Which begged the question: how could she hear them-

**-I’m calling a ceasefire; you get three days, no one else will come after you**

This was hers. *My memory.*

And the chill that followed; the resonance of his voice with something inside her that had already been growing. The knowledge of what he would do next.

*Oh God…*

Her pulse suddenly rocketed. Again, she knew what this was. *Again,* she couldn’t do anything about it but remain completely useless. *He dosed me with Mirakuru; now I have to deal with the consequences.* *So deal Felicity. Felicity. Felicity Smoak, I am Felicity-*

**Felicity Smoak? …Hi. I’m Oliver Queen**

...

…She woke. *Finally,* she woke.

And it was different, so dissimilar from how she fell. Not with a bang, *not* with a whimper, or a gasp like before… but with silence. One second she was frozen in unconscious stupor. The next…?

Her eyes just… opened. Just that. They opened.

And everything changed. The world changed.
Which wasn’t saying a whole lot. Her world practically took a 180 degree turn when Oliver walked into her office.

But. This. Was. **Different.**

True, she’d worn glasses – though she wasn’t wearing any right now - almost every day for the past 4 years and 7 months but it wasn’t as if she particularly needed them. She possessed a slight astigmatism that wasn’t always obvious but would sometimes make it difficult to stare at a computer screen all hours of the day or night. It could make the mornings blurry.

…Which was why seeing dust motes float against the ceiling as she stared up, seeing them so clearly that Felicity could define single colour strands of light between pockets of air, was enough to freeze her in place for a moment.

*Whoa.*

*That’s… unexpected.* Roy had never mentioned increased ocular output. Then again he’d only ever spoken to Oliver about it, however briefly. She swallowed. *Guess it’s one of the things I’ll have to get used to, right?* It wasn’t even a bad thing – could even be a good thing! It was just… something else to worry about. And speaking of worry…

Lying there she took in a breath. Then another. And counted backwards from 10 before letting it loose.

*Why don’t I feel altered?*

She didn’t mean physically.

*Emotional constancy.*

Roy possessed zero expressive stability, resorting often to anger or frustration or both in most situations. With Slade it was more of a controlled rage. But Felicity didn’t feel any of this. No anger. No rage - *no urge to crush a man’s spine, thank god.* Zilch. *Then again, I did just wake.* *Maybe it doesn’t happen immediately, maybe it takes time or there’s a trigger or something. Not that I’m wishing for it. I don’t exactly want to become the nation’s example for repressed, little IT nerds.* And ruminating this was possibly the last, most morbid thing she could be doing at this
moment. There were other things that needed her attention.

Like say… Oliver. She pursed her lips. Not my attention–attention, not in that way. Not that I wouldn’t focus all my attention on him — what a day at the beach that would make — no, I just mean… Crap. She needed to see him. For reassurance, just for reassurance, not for anything remotely hug-related…

She would have face-planted if she weren’t already lying down. Why does my brain always go there first? Don’t be so needy.

But she couldn’t help it; there was a wide space behind her eyes now, one slowly filling with terrifying images that shouldn’t be there. The feeling of being so utterly by herself was increasing with every second she lay down.

And she needed a shower. Pronto. Cause… ugh. It infiltrated her nostrils; a scent part metallic, part wet grass. Attractive.

But a shower meant movement and movement meant further discovery — am I still who I was or am I something else now — and what hadn’t perturbed her before falling unconsciousness was a fact she’d never be able shake off again. She was a host to Mirakuru. And all that entailed. A slow decline down insanity highway. She couldn’t fear for that yet. Another notch on Oliver’s belt of guilty mistakes.

He’d never see it any other way. She knew him well enough to know that.

I need to see him. She nodded to herself. It’s now or never. Hoping against hope that maybe just maybe it wasn’t all that bad, that the world hadn’t really changed at all, her world, Felicity slowly raised herself on her elbows, and then pulled herself fully upwards on the bed. And waited. Yet there was no pain, no sting, no plummeting of her insides as painkillers made short work of her digestive system, no… nothing. Just the newly acquired sharpness of her visual acuity. A sinking feeling in her chest.

And the abnormal rate of her heart beat. It was very fast.

She took a deep, shaky breath.
But just because there was an abundance of nothing didn’t mean that she was completely by herself…

Thea Queen was currently napping to her right. On the bed. With her, on the bed. But why? Not that it bothered her but… I’m covered in…

Slowly, oh so carefully, Felicity slid off the mattress and found she barely made a sound. Which was something that could and should never ever happen in this universe or any. Beauty and Grace I am NOT. But it was the colour of the sheets – exactly where she’d lain - that truly made her flinch; that made her incredibly steady hands suddenly shake. She tried – hard – not to feel around her shoulder blades, where she’d been cut.

Crusted red. Almost black in the pre-dawn hours. She almost backed away and could smell it in the air – I can smell it in THE AIR?!? – It couldn’t be more than four or five in the morning.

But Thea…

Curled up, as if she’d done her best to give an unconscious Felicity as much room as she possibly could, Thea slept like the dead. Appearing small, diminutive – appearances were deceiving creatures – her legs tucked beneath her bottom, shoes off, wearing a pair of sweats and a cotton tee, her hands up by her face which was cutely mashed into the pillow… her eyes were red rimmed and puffy. Tears. If anyone deserved the right to cry tonight it was Thea. The girl was a trooper. Having been kidnapped previously by Slade, this would have been almost as much a nightmare for her as it would have been – still is – for Oliver.

Tip toeing around the bed Felicity leaned over the sleeping Curly Sue, gently prying a few soft ringlets from her mouth and smiling slightly as she checked her temperature. Room temperature. No blanket required.

But why choose to sleep here of all places? On a bed splattered with red. Next to unconscious and creepy me. The way she’d shielded herself… maybe she just needed to be close to someone.

Maybe I’m not the best person to be around right now-

Ignore it.
Ignoring it. Noted. Letting her sleep, Felicity took a step back and turned, hoping to find a door, or a neon sign or something indicating ‘escape to a bathroom’ when it – reality and all its eccentricities - hit her square in the chest as her eyes landed on a familiar black suit jacket and tie. Oliver. This was Oliver’s old bedroom. The one he never slept in because he preferred the shadows of the foundry.

Frowning, she took in all the… brown. The antiques. The chairs. It doesn’t really feel like him. At all. It really didn’t. It was too impersonal to his own tastes – tastes she was sure he didn’t even know he possessed – and nothing in here screamed ‘Oliver’. But since it was his room and all… he wouldn’t mind if she made use of a bathroom that probably looked like it had walked off a catalogue page, would he?

Fingers tying and untying invisible knots Felicity stepped towards the closet door to the bed and peeked around the expensive wood- holy…

A five star hotel didn’t look as grand. She only knew what the inside of one looked like because she’d been forced to accompany Oliver to one months ago, as part of the company image during a visit to their subsidiaries in Central City.

Maybe that was why he’d never been comfortable at the Mansion. Once, a long time ago, in a galaxy named ‘Ollie’ it had probably suited him to the letter. Now? He was more a ’cabin in the woods’ kind of guy – except with less killing and more wood chopping.

Her trainers didn’t make a sound against the – the marble flooring, wow – agate, as she stepped inside and was immediately accosted by the scent of… tea tree. Leather. And… something else, something deeper, more visceral, something familiar… oh.

It was Oliver. Oliver’s smell. Like in the Foundry but more… soapy. The air – though not damp - was still kind of warm. It sank into her bones. She bit her lip. He’d been in here. Recently too, while she lay in the other room… on his bed. Swallowing she nodded to herself, attempting and failing to ignore this fact. For some reason it was difficult to rid her mind of ‘Oliver and soap’. And ‘wet’. Her throat constricted. ‘Naked’. Not necessarily in that order. Wow… is it hot in here? But it made her wonder.

He could have brought me anywhere; why bring me up here?

Why indeed
Her insides locked solid.

*Was that...?*

Heart racing in panic, she spun round finding no one and nothing.

...Right. Well done Felicity. Outdone by my own, apparently, genius level intellect. She felt foolish; as if scared by her own shadow, imagining one Slade Wilson power driving into the bathroom to impale her on his sword. *It wouldn’t be me he’d come after.* Was this a sign of stress maybe? Hopefully.

It really had been a long night, *especially if I’m hearing him in my head.*

Shake it off.

*Ignore.*

She did. She was good at shaking things off that hurt, scared, or humiliated her.

So...Oliver wouldn’t mind her taking a shower here would he? She’d prefer to ask but... leaving the room, looking as she did... *not* an idea she favoured. She wanted to leave the night behind her with some dignity left over. Prepare for a new day. To not be a constant reminder that Slade had tried to kill his family.

Looking down at herself, she was faced with her first obstacle: she had no clean clothes to change into. She didn’t need to look into the large mirror to her side to know that her back, on the hoodie at the very least, looked like a sight from a horror move. Her face probably suited it too. Her clothes were ruined, stained. But before she could contemplate running throughout the Queen mansion and calling out to Oliver like Cathy did to Heathcliff across the Moors, she spotted a large white t-shirt and some grey slacks just sitting innocently on the side of the sink.

...Those would do. *Beggars can’t be choosers.*

She was out of the grey hoodie before she’d realised she’d even moved- then paused.
She brought the hoodie up, close to her face and inhaled the scent there – one purely ‘Oliver’, even after hours of ‘felicity’, her sweat and blood soaked into the lining; it was still very present, if faint – closing her eyes and drifting momentarily.

There was nothing else like it. Nothing so utterly safe. And comforting.

Taking in the soft texture, the image of Oliver wearing it after one too many late night injuries made her let loose a shaky exhale; she’d never begrudge the man his wounds in the line of fire… but remembering him wrapped up in this hoodie, she’d one too many times daydreamed about how… snug and squishy – for I am Dory - he looked wearing it. About how much she’d have loved to just… be there for him. To hold him. To care for and shelter him. And make him feel as safe as he made her feel. Like that’ll ever happen. Physically Felicity had never made a single soul feel secure. It was impossible. Laughable. She had neither the form, figure nor the countenance for such a feat.

Her fingers graced the tear at the shoulder with regret. It’s ruined. He has more than one but…
And let it drop to the floor. Swiftly, her yoga pants followed, then her sports bra. Eventually she found the courage needed to turn and face her reflection but it was still a shock, still humbling and terrifying to discover that she was completely healed. No horrible injury to the forehead, no bruise on her cheek… her skin as soft as ever and a slight pink blush n her cheeks: her back looked much as it had before Slade had taken a sword to it.

She stared at herself, taking a step into the dim light.

One minute turned into two, to five, to ten before she sighed. Suddenly realising her nakedness, her arms rose to cover her breasts. She was nude and anybody could walk in. Why am I just standing here? Shower. I can handle a shower, she thought as she stepped beyond the translucent glass door, like a boss. A very capable former EA of QC’s former CEO.

And if she let her fingers make short work of the sponge there that smelled like Oliver, if she traced the delicate prints of blood on the tiles left behind by hands bigger than hers against the wall – she could see him in her mind’s eye hunched forwards, arms bracketing his head against the sleek surface as he let hot water flow down his back and shivered, long night indeed - if her fingers slid amongst, caressed and discovered, doing the walking, and the talking of all his things… nobody would know-

Who are you trying to fool girl
Spitting out warm water, she spluttered. Wide eyed, wet and suddenly trembling, her body stilled again, shoulders hunched up by her neckline, arms wrapped around her front, eyes searching, waiting…

But there was nobody there.

*What’s going on?*

Water from the shower head continued to hit the floor but there was no other sound.

An unsteady laugh escaped her. *Maybe the Queen Mansion is haunted. Maybe all mansions are haunted. Maybe, maybe, maybe…* There was a buzzing in her ears and she tried to swallow - but her throat was so dry – as her eyes closed. Her heart was racing once again, padding along like horse hooves in a sprint; it was a monstrous piece of work now – it made her scared of herself, made her cower against her thoughts, made her whimper and quake, even though the water was scalding.

*Stay calm. Breathe* - just like before, when Oliver had held her - *just keep picturing that, how safe you felt, how safe he made you feel - and you’re here; in his house.*

But the pounding of her heart grew stronger. It was biological, not psychological and it needed to stop doing that; soon it would be louder than her thoughts and for Felicity Smoak that was unthinkable.

But she felt so alone-

*Stop it. She turned back towards the water. You’re just… stop it. There’s nothing wrong.*

Yet half an hour later… *everything* was so, so wrong.

The shirt was too big and the pants slid down her ass – they were Oliver’s so thinking on it, if they had fit her, she’d have to kill herself a little bit – *But I can’t go outside looking like this!*

“Felicity?”
Uh oh. Her head snapped up from where she’d been staring, aghast at the drawstring sweatpants now a pool of black around her feet.

Thea.

Then the lightest tap, tap, tap sound of a small fist rapping on wood sounded. “Felicity? Are you okay?” Thea asked again from beyond the door, her voice quiet. “I heard the shower…” there was a moment were the Queen sibling seemed to cecum out to nerves, which was odd – the indomitable Thea Queen losing to anything like insecurity. “But I figured you’d want some privacy.”

Closing her eyes, Felicity’s head tilted as she prayed for patience. Not because of Thea. No, it’s the universe conspiring against me, just that. At the mercy of the Queen’s – not necessarily a bad place to be, being at Oliver’s mercy, which was an image absolutely necessary to conjure at whatever o’clock in the morning – the same people who she’d just escaped death with, were now going to have to tolerate her super naked glory – spoiler alert: it’s not so glorious – so cursing heaven and all its angels was the least she could do.

I’m pant-less and PANTIE-LESS - let’s not forget that one anytime soon – and standing in Oliver’s on-suite bathroom, in a mansion ruled by Moira Queen who hates me and probably wishes I was road kill somewhere 8 hours back instead of enjoying 20 minutes of steaming hot hose. Again in Oliver’s bathroom. Again, PANTIE-LESS. Because she couldn’t put the one’s she’d worn all day yesterday and had sweat and bled in – the wound on her back had well and truly seeped – back on.

She scratched her forehead in lamentation before crossing over to open the door and smiling as the small gap revealed a very fidgety-looking Thea Queen. “I’m here.”

“Um…” The brunette’s eyes travelled fast and fluid all over Felicity’s T-Shirt covered form before landing on her face and pressed her lips together. “Hey.”

So much like her brother. “Hi. So erm…” Before the day fully breaks Felicity. “I have no pants. Completely pant-less.”

“Sorry?”

“Or underwear. Of any kind. The bra I’m fine going without; it’s not like I’m packing anything
major here.” She closed her eyes; *any day of the week can I just not be me for like, five seconds?* She forced out words. “But the panties are somewhat… required.”

But far from looking embarrassed by Felicity’s babbling, Thea simply frowned. “Didn’t Ollie leave you something to wear?”

It took her a moment – the fishlike opening and closing of her mouth had something to do with that because *hello:* Oliver had left those clothes, *his* clothes, for *her* – to respond. “Well h-he did. But, ah...” Stepping out from behind the door Felicity pointed out the tiny hiccup in her brother’s plan. “The shirt is a tent.” It reached her thighs and fell down one shoulder, revealing quite distinctly her current lack of bra. “But I could handle that if there were pants. Pants on everyone.” Pleadingly, she finished. “His pants are too big. And I need something to cover up that I’m...”


“Right.”

But then Thea just came right on out and said: “Pretty sure Ollie wouldn’t mind if you borrowed a pair of his boxer shorts.”


“His boxer shorts? I think he wears them; unless you’d prefer boxer briefs.”

And every thought frizzled into none existence.

Blinking short, hard blinks; once, twice, it took a minute for Felicity to figure this out before she settled for, “yeah, that’s what I thought you’d said.”

“Come on.” Thea replied and it was only then that Felicity realised just how tied up in knots the young woman was. She was smiling and beckoning still but... her eyes were red rimmed and her hands kept moving. “I wanted to ask this when you woke...” yep; even her voice was trembling, “but you weren’t there so... and you look alright but... *are* you alright?”
Standing now, back inside Oliver’s bedroom, Thea waited.

And Felicity, who’d followed her; a soft frown furrowing her brow, looked back.

Thea looked… cold. Physically. Like she needed soup, coffee, a big hug. Slade’s imminent imprisonment, Roy, chocolate and a vacation. This list was not exhaustive and not necessarily in descending order.

Felicity’s voice fell into a soothing lull. “I’m okay Thea.”

“You were bleeding.”

She tried not to flinch and succeeded, smiling in her best – yet so pathetic – attempt to instil some of the assurance she didn’t 100% feel herself. “Not bleeding anymore.”

Thea’s arms crossed at her middle. “It’s like with Roy.”

_Uh oh. “What do you mean?” Alarm bells ringing._

“Roy before he… left.” She swallowed. “Before we split, he’d get hurt. And then he’d be fine almost right away. I don’t know how to explain it but I think maybe my brother does.”

_Disarm, re-direct! “Who, Oliver?” A nervous titter left her and she was pretty sure her eye twitched. “Why would he-”_  

“He’s the Arrow.”

“Right, because he’s the Ar-” Her throat closed, a dying whale sound accompanying it, _oh god_, and ventured forth regardless, _this is so not good_. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

By the sheer confidence on Thea’s face, Felicity figured she was missing something but the expletives shrieking in her skull prevented her from finding out just what by herself. “He’s the Arrow.” The Queen sibling reiterated. “The actual Arrow. He told me he was, more or less.”  

_More_
or less? And, oh, her voice was all… fluffy. Happy, a little smug and a whole lot proud of her big brother. Felicity could literally feel her heart going gooey at the message it all sent. But then Thea finished with: “which mean’s Roy’s been working with him.”

Stepping forwards Felicity held up a hand – *Be kind, rewind* – needing to backtrack. “Again, I’m sorry, but he said what?” And she had to be sure. “He told you he was the Arrow… *more or less?”*

Eyes flickering here, there and everywhere in confusion Thea blinked. “Well, yeah; I asked him if he was the Arrow and when he didn’t say anything I told him I’d take his silence as a direct admission.” She shrugged. “He still didn’t say a word.”

Surprised, it took Felicity a moment… *Oliver. He must have been completely worn out to leave himself so open. Or maybe he just… wanted her to know.*

He finally told her. Something inside Felicity settled. *Good for him.*

She didn’t realise the soft smile on her face told a story until Thea spoke again. “I knew you knew.”

*That* broke her out of her musings scary fast. “Huh.”

Thea actually scoffed; sounding much more like the self-assured heiress she used to be and rolled her eyes. “Oh come on; the crossbow?” She backed up and added. “That was seriously badass btw.”

“Really?” So it may not be the point she should be focusing on, okay, but she really couldn’t help the tiny – honest it was miniscule – blush that flushes her face. *Badass. There’s a word I never thought would be used in association with yours truly.* “Thank you.”

There was a moment of silence.

“…You’re welcome.” Swallowing, Thea spoke to the floor. But before question marks could litter the air the girl had stepped forwards, wrapping her in what would have been a bruising hug if not for her new Mirakuru enhanced musculature structure.
“Thea?” Felicity’s hands automatically moved to stroke slow, roving circles on the girl’s back.

The reply was muffled in Felicity’s hair as both were almost the same height. “I haven’t really said thank you yet. One thing happened after the other and…”

“There’s been no room to breathe?” Felicity hazarded.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I’m actually surprised it worked at-”

“That’s what Ollie said.”

The rest of her sentence died on Felicity’s lips, which was great seeing as how it would neither boost her ego nor inflate the trivial amount of safety Thea had managed to regain during the night. “He isn’t wrong.” She whispered and noticed absently the slow rocking motion she’d begun with the girl.

Pretty sure that was a yawn too. The slight pause and the flex of Thea’s jaw against Felicity’s neck confirmed it. “He said I never need to thank him.”

A nod. “He’s right.”

“Sounds lonely.”

She thought of the lair, late into the night, when Oliver would systematically turn half the lights off. She thought of his ultra-fast and squeaky clean hook up with Sara, months after his – never to be mentioned or thought of again – also super speedy judgement call with Isabel. She thought of the way he’d tried so hard to convince Thea how much he loved and cared for her despite all the lies and contradictions. And she thought of herself, hidden in plain sight with no social life to speak of, knowing and accepting that not one soul would understand her true vocation and finally uttered: “It can be.”

When Thea pulled back she didn’t go far.
Instead her eyes quested. “So… are you this Black Canary the Newscasts keep going on about?”

Can you choke on air? “Who, me? No!” What even… is she joking? Shaking her head she stared at Thea. “No, that’s… that would be Sara.” She conceded with a sigh. Might as well go the full mile here.

“Oh.” The lacklustre response kind of threw Felicity. But then Thea continued with, “so that’s why they’re sleeping with each other,” in such an, oh that makes sense, fashion.

Wow. In a way it’s so correct it’s not even an assumption to make. And she had nothing. Bubkis. Nada. Though she wanted, really and truly, to tell Thea something that would allow the very new pride she now felt for Oliver to soar to new heights, what could she possibly say? No Thea, they’re in love. Totally and completely smitten, head over heels, she is his lobster, it just didn’t ring true.

Or maybe it did… and Felicity just didn’t see it. Because she didn’t want to? Because she’d seen proof that their relationship could deteriorate faster than it actually started? Because, because…

Oliver… deserved more. They both did.

And it wasn’t even the small jolts of wistful envy she felt whenever she remembered them together, or the sadness and shame that came into being when she remembered clearly the feel of Oliver’s arms – his biceps, triceps, all the ‘ceps,’ and the sheer warmth - wrapped around her with his heartbeat pulsing to her own cadence in her ear that made her think any of this.

It was because, like Diggle, Felicity understood him.

It wasn’t Sara who Oliver had been dreaming of for a year after his return. That was Laurel; a woman Oliver might still hold a flame for. It wasn’t Sara whose name Oliver had mumbled, unconscious and in pain: he’d called out for Shado, Slade’s love. A love triangle turned tragic. Shakespeare at its most brutal. Oliver had the capacity to fall for and maintain love for more than 1 woman at any given time. And Sara definitely was never mentioned whenever Oliver talked – in those brief few and far between moments – about the things he wanted and never thought he could have.

Though it hadn’t been a shock to Felicity: she’d seen it coming. From the moment she first met
Sara she knew the Arrow and his Canary, Amazonian goddess would end up sharing a bed.

_Cause, duh._

They were both so extraordinary she’d think it odd if they hadn’t. Didn’t mean she didn’t hurt inside. A small, silent wound, the size of a bullet hole near her aorta – locked away where no one could see – ignored for the most part because she’d accepted the fundamental truth of her and Oliver:

Whatever connection that _may_ exist between them, it would _never_ be acknowledged. And she respected him for that. Ollie Queen may have been a tease and cheat but Oliver Queen wasn’t either of those things.

She had his respect.

Yet she remembered the way Diggle had blinked at the change in Oliver, at the speed of ‘him and Sara’. She also remembered how his knowing eyes had cut to her almost immediately afterwards and how she’d fended him off with a single look screaming ‘it’s their business’. She wished she could rewind time and not wonder, for the longest moment, what it was like to be on the receiving ends of those small pecks between their lips, of their casual hand holding…

Because he’d _stopped_. Since he began his relationship with Sara Lance Oliver had ceased touching her.

_Completely and effortlessly._

It’s been said – by ‘I don’t know who’ – that you don’t know what you have until you lose it. Well, it hadn’t hit Felicity until then just how much she and Oliver gave each other during the night hours. How much they shared. And what it meant to her, how much she needed that.

To survive.

To just _sleep_ at night.
Until it was gone; transferred to another who could both give and take so much more.

To say that it hadn’t stung… even a little… would be a lie that Felicity could never admit to herself. For one thing this IT girl – his girl – didn’t do, it was lie to herself about her feelings.

True, he hadn’t touched her often. But the careless brushes of fingers, the shoulder grasping, the occasional back grace when they were entering a room together, the up close and in-your-face-discussions – personal space be damned - where those piercing blue orbs would spear almost inappropriately through her own were no longer available to her.

So Felicity did what Felicity was apt at: she accepted it, re-discovered her place on the team and had continued to perform to the best of her ability both in the field and as a friend.

But it didn’t answer why Thea thought-

“It’s just that after Laurel,” Thea offered, probably noting the odd look on Felicity’s face – odd because not even she understood what she was feeling right then – with a shrug and a smile as she made her way towards Oliver’s cupboard, “I didn’t think he’d want to delve into ‘Lance’ territory again. Too much history and all that jazz.”

_Maybe, but… _“But he shouldn’t be alone just because he’s Oliver Queen. Just because he’s the Arrow.”

The frown Thea pulled as she turned back to her made no sense to Felicity. “You care a lot about my brother don’t you?”

“What about you?” Because, absolutely yes, change the subject please. “You seem to be taking this whole ‘my brother is the Arrow’ thing pretty well.”

Cue major eye-roll Thea Queen Style – it put all other eye rolls to shame – as she leaned against the drawer. “Please: I’m not even close to finished with asking him about it but… it feels really, really good just knowing about it. So much makes sense now.”

A laugh sprang free from her throat. “Yeah; that’s what I said when he first told me who he was.”
“And how did that go?”

“Um, bleeding and unconscious in the back of my tiny car?”

One blink. Two blinks. “That’s… interesting.” Said like a question. The younger of the two choked out. “You know we’re going to have to talk, you and I. Over mint-choc-chip and alcohol. And a movie. Queen Tradition.”

“Sounds nice…”

It had been a while. A long while really, since Felicity had indulged in social comforts-

**Overly sensitive women – something Oliver never truly understood**

Her smile fell off her face like a slap.

*No.*

Any ounce of relief gained since she stepped out of the shower faded into dust. All it takes is a second. Just one. Light dies. Darkness falls. Fear becomes the dominant. Everything changed. *It really did.* How could she think it wouldn’t? *How could I be so stupid?* So lax.

It was like she couldn’t move: breaths frozen, *terrified*; disbelief making her muscles tense so tight it hurt. Because *he was just standing there*…

She stared at him.

*It can’t be…* but it was. *He* was… his presence became a sharp image from a blur; *he’s not supposed to be here, not with me. Not here with me,* moving out from the confines of illusion to reality, to the forefront of her mind and eyes.

No. He was real. *No.*
Closer this time. Right. In. Her. Ear-

**Then again, I suppose it depends on your definition of sensitive**

Her eyes slammed shut at the whisper – but not before she caught the flash of brown irises so dark they were almost black. He’d smiled slightly.

*Slade*

**Hello Felicity**

It was like a bullet to the stomach. He was right there. *It doesn’t make sense*. Yet it made all the sense. She swallowed… *I thought I was imagining it. I thought that I was just afraid* – like always, so afraid – *that I was hearing what I least wanted to hear*. She should have realised, should have remembered that humans receive the least miracles.

It takes time to fall into madness… with Mirakuru, madness was gifted.

Slade stepped past her, his shoes making zero sound as he walked forwards. It was casual – as if he had all the time in the world - between her and Thea. Thea who hadn’t stopped rambling on about late nights with Oliver on the sofa, Thea who is Oliver’s sister and was kidnapped and made to feel out of place in the Queen family by callously telling her of her heritage by the same man. Thea who he’d tried to kill tonight…

For a one time stopping second Felicity almost screamed at the girl to run.

**That won’t be necessary**

Her eyes flew back to meet the face man who’d given them all reason to fear sleep and dreams.

**She can’t see me - I’m not here for her**
Felicity blinked: he was right; the younger woman didn’t notice. Didn’t see him. He was for her eyes only.

Thank God…

Wrong again

And suddenly it was painful, sickening. And it wasn’t a hot heat: it was a cold poison – not a heartbeat: a deathly silence in her brain where screams, memories not her own, wants and dreams that she’d never considered clawed at her, reaching for her, to drag her back down with-

Bending at the waist, Felicity gasped, grasping the hair on head, knowing she looked like ‘The Scream’s’ answer to a real time depiction… but it hurt too much, was too frightening to cope with.

Her heart plummeted when Thea’s face pushed into her vision.

I’m making things worse…

“Felicity!”

I’m fine. It’s a ‘Slade special’ kind of torture, so it’ll be fine. I’m going to completely ignore that he’s standing right there and everything. Will. Be. Fine… Her mouth opened to express the lie, to ease the look of ‘disturbia’ written on Thea’s face, which was suddenly chalky white, but… nothing came out. Except another gasp and a choked sound of pain.

It was enough for Thea to act on. “I’ll get Ollie!”

A flare of panic forced her to breathe once. Twice. No. “Thea…’ she tried to reach her but almost fell over from the strain in her head. He doesn’t need this, not now. He needs Sara. And Thea, his mother, not me. Not his IT girl loosing it-

Tell yourself whatever you need to, whatever safety nets give you ease; it won’t change the
Eyes opening wide, her gaze shot up to stare at her illusion. He was leaning against the bathroom doorway, following Thea’s escape from the room. He wasn’t smiling.

“Why are you hurting me?” She whispered, stumbling away from him.

He looked at her.

It’s not me

She stared at him and the side of his mouth twitched.

In the figurative sense… it’s not me

And it hit her that he wasn’t wearing an eye patch. That he was wearing green fatigues and a black muscle T instead of his impressive overcoat, that the look on his face wasn’t bitter resentment, wasn’t anger or hatred or insanity… it was pure calm. He was different, this Slade Wilson.

Confused, befuddled, discombobulated – pick an adjective – the bridge of her brow crinkled and she swallowed, opening her mouth to speak but-

“OLLIE!”

Like being slammed back into her body, the shout made something inside her snap into action.

Oliver.

She was out of the door – it slammed against the wall; there’d be a hole and she’d hate herself for leaving evidence of her clash with reality - before she could say another word, her feet burning friction against the carpet covered hallway, desperate to reach Thea before the inhabitants of the mansion could realise that, yes, Felicity Smoak was infected with a lethal substance that causes
fluctuations in social behaviour, absolute uprisings in aggression and a fairly morose twist of psychosis.

And apparently, hallucinations.

But all she knew, all she could think… was that she couldn’t think. Was that she didn’t know what to do. And the wrenching fear that Oliver would look at her the exact same way Sara had looked at Roy. It was clouding her thoughts, that there was a realm of possibility where he might lose trust in her, that John would be wary of her and that Sara wouldn’t even speak to her…

That Oliver, who no longer touched her – except he had tonight, with varying degrees of maddening soulfulness, gentleness and need – would never do so again.

That a shadow, one that already played with his dreams, was following her steps.

All this… just so that Slade could hurt Oliver.

I don’t need to be saved. I’m all right. I’m good, all by myself. We can tell him that I’m alright, me and Thea.

It didn’t reach her that all she wore – seriously; ‘all’ - was simply Oliver’s sweet smelling shirt or that her damp hair had started to aggressively curl.

Hitting a corner in a blur of speed and fractured sight, she glimpsed the brunette who was leaning over the banister, her mouth opening, lungs inhaling, voice reaching again for her ‘Ollie’-

Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry-

Because she couldn’t stop herself.

Too fast and too strong for muscle memory to adapt to with any kind of ease she slammed into Thea Queen, yelping at the split second image shock of being several metres away from her to suddenly being on top of the girl – this was not in the job description when I became EA to the EO of Queen Consolidated – and immediately rolling off of her, into a crouch, eyes wide and numbed,
her voice trembled with apologies.

“Thea, God, I’m so sorry.” His sister had only tried to help.

Moving to stand she took a timid step closer, reaching down to her with shaking fingers, trying not to both flinch and laugh at the ‘what the hell’ expression she found there. “I couldn’t stop myself and-”

PAIN

Like someone had released a grenade against beside her head.

But she supposed that’s what you get when you meet the business end of a short staff with your face. The cheek bone, to be exact. The force of it rippled through her skin and muscle, straight into her skull. Lights flashed behind her eyes. The sky turned dark. Her balance toppled and she hit the bannister support.

Wh-what…

Felicity blinked at the ground floor, 15 feet below her. Shock made everything fade for a moment because…

Sara.

Felicity knew, of course she did. They were friends and had gotten nicely informal with each other, having actually spent time together outside of the ‘Lair’. Dancing in Verdant. Eating at Big Belly. Watching movies Sara had missed out on. Casual things… but none of it had actually happened until Oliver and Sara had fought: their first fight. To which Felicity and Diggle had been unwilling witnesses to who’d desperately wanted to escape.

It had been before Slade had arrived unwanted to the party in Starling. Oddly enough it had started as a soft conversation between them about Laurel and how she was coping – or rather how she was utterly not coping – with her substance abuse problems and had erupted into a yelling match involving their raison d’etre.
Or more specifically, how Oliver’s original mission had managed to enfold Dig, Felicity and… Sara’s father, Quentin Lance, into the mix.

The specifics were lost on her now; it had been... not petty exactly; it was more a misunderstanding than anything else. Anyway, right after the fact, Sara had joined her upstairs at the club where Felicity had fled to. In fact, after every fight Sara and Oliver had – and there had been one too many, usually always involving the method in which Oliver bags his criminals or the way Sara just straight up kills them – the strawberry blonde warrior princess would join her for a little TLC.

So inevitably they’d gotten kind of close. It was how Felicity knew that Sara detested Slade, even though the circumstances leading to his antagonistic rise were more than understandable. Trauma induced insanity wasn’t something easily reckoned with. But Sara... she hates him, irrevocably.

Slade had prevented her and ‘Ollie’ from getting home.

The odd snippets Sara had shared concerning her time on Lian Yu – which was, unsettlingly, far more than Oliver had ever wished to share – had painted a sad picture of a girl who’d allowed herself to fall into Stockholm Syndrome in order to survive in harsh lands far from home. Of a young woman who had been reunited, miraculously with her, once and again, crush – though the crush evolved staggeringly fast into young love and bitter regret. Of someone who missed her family terribly and had decided to lump her lot with two people on that same island who were supposed to help her return home. And hadn’t. Instead, not in a moment of passionate discomposure but of a calculated decision, one of them had turned against the remaining two, uncaring about how much they’d endured and twisting an already impossible fight for survival into a nightmare. And once again it resulted in her being lost at sea. Her very own hell on earth. Only to be found and moulded by a clandestine group of assassins who would not only extract whatever lingering remnants of innocence she’s still possessed – sanitizing them before her - they would show her that deep down, in many ways, as per Sara’s words, she was just as bad as Slade.

I didn’t believe that. I still don’t.

It didn’t matter: Sara did. And it was the second reason why Sara wanted to, very seriously, kill him.

Her final reason was simply because the man sacred her to death. Get in line.

But for Sara it was very different. No matter how strong or ruthless Sara could and had become; Slade was the real deal. In some ways, Felicity figured that Sara still felt very much like that lost
little girl, aged 20, on an island full of older men, terrified of what they might do to her. It would explain how and why she’d only targeted rapists in her lonesome nights after the quake. That feeling only increased with the presence of Slade Wilson and his steady decline into his personal brand of madness.

Just as he was with Oliver – Sara had hinted, more than once, that Slade was a name he mumbled often in his sleep… Slade… and Shado - Slade was a figure in Sara’s nightmares as well, just from a different angle. So… very much like with what Felicity had come to understand with her, Sara – the Canary – needed to eliminate that threat.

For peace of mind and soul.

Which was also why having Sara consider her to be just as much of a threat as she did Slade, made Felicity feel as if she’d just been dropped from an airplane without a parachute.

Because… she couldn’t. Not Sara. Right?

It was devastating, not the hit to the face – though that was not pretty.

The part of her that could only bow in the face of unmet teenage expectations wanted to start crying – I’m talking big, blubberyng, bucket loads of tears - the red heat of the strike still coursing through her, each throb lashing pressure behind her eyes, I will. Not. Cry.

But it also crushed the muscles of her heart, even as it pounded, the feeling lashing heat to her extremities, making them shake and clench.

Like a panic attack

Both ‘fight’ and ‘flight’ instincts were warring for dominance.

With short, jerky movements, Felicity swallowed and managed to half turn away from the bannister, watching, mouth open as Sara – In a soft sweater hidden beneath her intimidating leather jacket - pulled Thea to her feet and pushed her back towards the wall.
With her hair flaring golden in the faint sunrise, the whole time she’d stood there, Sara’s eyes didn’t leave Felicity’s. Wide, focused, ice blue…

…Cold. She wasn’t seeing her friend; she saw Mirakuru.

Dread shoots like a stone to the pit of Felicity’s stomach.

She’s standing there before the Canary in all her ass kicking, leather wearing glory, looking like she’s been carved from stone; a Greek statue, a tribute to Athena and oh frack, is Felicity not prepared for this because, I have no frackin clue what to frackin do next!

The twirl of the staff was almost hypnotic.

Then sound hits her suddenly and is chaotic; Thea’s confused voice and Sara’s controlled anger as she almost hurls the girl off the floor - a dull roar she couldn’t quite fathom over the knowledge that it was already starting; friend turning on friend.

“What are you doing?!”

“Thea, get behind me!”

“Get off me! No, she was just- Sara!”

And it’s as if everything slows.

She can clearly see the moment Sara decides it’s still not enough, that a hit to the face didn’t do the job – whatever that might be – and moves to go in for the kill, so to speak. God I hope it’s ‘so to speak’.

The muscles in Sara’s leg shifts and pull, something Felicity shouldn’t have noticed. But if that was true then she also shouldn’t have noticed the way her friend’s hips tense in line with her spine, how her back bends and biceps ripple beneath that tight black as she pushes however much strength she’s somehow determined is needed down her biceps, and she absolutely shouldn’t notice the tiny pull of the woman’s strawberry blonde brow and the slight – but somehow to Felicity –
crystal clear and easily missed flash of hurt in Sara’s eyes as she says… “I’m sorry Felicity.”

And then goes for the neck shot; if done correctly - and she knows this from watching Sara and Oliver on the mats - it renders the victim unconscious in seconds.

She could let her do that…

*Wait a minute, I could LET her do what?*

*It wouldn’t be difficult to simply…*

And yes, he’s there; an indistinct spectre in her peripheral. A dark blur of darker meaning. So she doesn’t know if it’s him or herself, doesn’t know if it’s the Mirakuru or just her own instincts guiding her after almost 2 years with two impressively skilled fighters - one of whom forces her to the mats herself from time to time – that allows her to weave under the staff before it strikes her.

That allows her to really, impressively, move.

Because suddenly she’s in there – heart pounding in her throat, blood rushing too fast – as her arm curls fast over Sara’s leading hand, gripping it and twisting-

And Sara cries out… Sara. In pain. *Because of me…*

*I feel sick.* But all she’d wanted was for Sara to drop the weapon, so she isn’t yet done and reaches fast for the wood before it fully drops to the floor and kicks it off the banister.

Then Sara’s foot comes out of nowhere and she lets it, suddenly terrified that it’s even an option, frightened once again of moving, of breathing, of hurting someone else and she’s being hit before she can count, kick… kick… and kick… after kick, and for a woman who doesn’t have Mirakuru running through her system, Sara Lance is ridiculously strong.

But then she hears it… and wants to enfold herself in it; to crawl inside and be held within its safety. Just as much as she wants, needs, to flee from it. From him.
Not this. He can’t see this, the way I am…

“Sara, stop! Sara!”

She’d heard him pounding up the staircase on the third kick.

How he’d rounded the corner on the fourth - and she caught a split second image of him before the final blow made her double forwards – how he’d sped over the carpet, barefooted and breathless. His face a monument to zero tolerance: he looked furious – all bent out of shape with his shirt askew - as if he’d just walked into the lair to find out someone had set fire to his suit and Felicity had to wonder, why is he so…

“SARA!”

Oh.

Breathing in deeply, she’d barely managed to stagger upright as her head rose to glimpse him and wished she hadn’t – it wasn’t fair - because he was just… perfect.

But… he was. Very much so. To her.

With all his failings and weaknesses, the so called limitations others had pegged to his name and face and voice, to Felicity he was… the best person. The very best. She wasn’t the type to be blinded by amazing good looks and talent or the kind of voice that made a certain weak spot on the spine tingle and quiver, knees shake and palms sweat…

Didn’t mean she was immune but… it wasn’t about that for her. The moment she met him she’d seen something she’d liked: yes he was ridiculous – all muscles and jawline and eyes, geez, the eyes – and beautiful – beautifully scarred – emotionally, physically: absolutely. But there was a kind of peace he provoked in her. And a convicted sort of need he’d revitalised making her test her limits through helping people and by correcting mistakes. He was her hero because he’d made her into one too. It wasn’t something you could simply repay. And she didn’t want to… it was between
them, *just us*, and it made her want to grasp onto it with both hands and never let it go.

But sometimes, for someone else, you have to.

Like… right about now? *I’ve just hurt his girlfriend… Oh God. That isn’t the kind of thing Oliver could forgive easily. Or at all.* The idea that he wouldn’t forgive her for something, *anything*? It was unthinkable.

Stumbling back, she swallows back her feelings with zero success, immediately looking, not to Oliver (though heaven knows she wants to) but for an escape - because everything inside was screaming for it – when her gaze falls on Thea. Impetuous, the girl was inching towards her – *er, no* - reaching for her arm and the look on her face isn’t fearful or angry; it’s sympathetic. Connecting. As if… it’s not her that Thea’s concerned about. The way her eyes dart to Sara’s form it kind of answers the question as to who she might be trying to get away from.

*Ah… What?*

Well… it made a kind of sense. Sara did kind of… sort of, blitz up the stairs like a wraith and just start attacking her. Though Felicity understood the whys of it all, Thea hadn’t a clue.

Regardless she took another step away until her back hit the bannister again, shaking her head-

“It’s okay.” Thea said, simply trying to calm her, to prove to her that a little fall wasn’t going to upset the once and again heiress. “It was an accident; we both fell over.”

Yes, it was an accident, but it was one caused by Mirakuru. Which meant that, by no means, was she to go near Oliver’s little sister, no matter how much gumption and brass the girl possessed.

A juvenile show of nerves comes with the urge to fiddle with her fingers; instead she rakes them through her hair, stopping short when Oliver’s eyes slam into hers.

Unbeknownst to her, moving away from Thea put her closer to him and now he’s just a couple of metres away, a hand raised like a stop sign but not in her direction. But in Sara’s. Briefly, guiltily – *oh so guiltily, sorry Sara* – Felicity spares Sara a brief glance finding with certain kind of static shock – basically, she flinches – that Sara’s somewhat visceral side, her assassin’s nature so to speak, is very much present in the way she looks at Felicity.
God… there was nothing she could say. She might be looking at Sara like she’s the universe’s answer to fat free ice cream that tastes just as delicious as full fat – begging her not to hate her – but it wasn’t reaching the woman. There was no hate there or anything to suggest that she no longer saw Felicity as a woman she trusted. But there was a distinct pain in her gaze: Sara had been betrayed before by a friend or two.

*She’s mentally preparing herself for a fall. It was staggering. But I wouldn’t, I would never…*

Involuntarily, her eyes flicker back to Oliver. *Please don’t look at me like you want to put an arrow in me,* and then, well…

He’s *still* looking at her.

He’d never stopped.

Hadn’t moved or even attempted to move, not away from her or towards the Xena-like Sara, not towards his startled sister… he was speaking, slow and steady and *soft…* gentle, soothing. And she’d think he was worried about her sanity if he were speaking to her now like she was a feral animal … except the expression on his face knocked the wind out of that sail. And he’s had an emotional sort of day so it’s understandable… at least that’s what she tries to tell herself.

He looks so… reassured.

Like a heavy weight had been lifted from his chest and he could, finally, breathe again.

It was palpable, that relief. She could feel it against the skin of her face as his eyes trailed snowflakes over each ridge and curve.

On him it lined every crevice – *he looks so tired.* And he really did: like he could sleep for weeks. It isn’t just physical either; it’s a *lot* more than that, his eyes screaming the truth of it as his tongue tastes the dryness of the nights anxiety left on his lips.

She shudders.
Maybe it’s only Felicity who hears it, who hears the lonely scream- odd since he’s with Sara - that echo’s in every feature of his face. And maybe seeing hallucination ‘Slade’ wasn’t the end of that ride.

But it’s his eyes that cancel the sound of his voice – if only temporarily – as they reach into her, the blue pulling at her fear and asking her to come rest. To fall into them, into him. They lured those eyes. They enticed and searched and pulled at the senses, at her instinct to want to hide, which he seemed to have guessed, given how he had completely blocked her exit down the stairs.

And she could focus now on his words, which was good seeing as how she knew that if she stared any harder he might actually see the words ‘I’m yours’ printed across her forehead. Getting a grip, it seemed, was not an option.

“Thea,” he was saying now, his voice a deep lull, “you okay?”

He spoke quite calmly and quietly and, oh God I floored his sister, which was absolutely why he was taking a very slow step towards me because I hurt her and not any of the other stuff that my lovesick brain provided for and-

“I’m fine!” Thea stated, her hair falling about her shoulders as she whipped her head to and fro. “Nothing even happened.”

But then Sara, who stood so silently to the side, her wrist a dead weight, opened her mouth. “I saw her push you to the ground.” She said quietly, looking at Felicity the entire time. “Felicity isn’t… herself right now. There was every chance that she could have hurt you.”

And yes, it hurts, a lot, being spoken about like that – as if she would ever deliberately go out to hurt another person, Mirakuru or not - her heart’s thumping in her chest, her throat dry and suddenly the slight breeze on her legs makes her remember how ‘almost naked’ she is and it doesn’t help because she knows she looks pathetic. Weak. Overcome. She understands that to an outsider she might actually look like she’s just run out of a Psych Ward but she’s standing in front of Oliver, looking this distressed and hopeless, this uncovered, this abnormal… the t-shirt barely reaches mid-thigh and without underwear she feels… inappropriate.

Yet the look Oliver throws Sara…
As if she’s just uttered words offensive to all mankind, Oliver’s brow turns from unmarred to harsh in a second and the peaceful assurance he’d been offering until moments ago disappears along with it.

And then he whispers, “Sara,” and it’s almost a lovers word; except Felicity knows what Oliver’s voice sounds like when it whispers in the ear words of understanding and affection…and she knows exactly what it sounds like when he’s making threats over the coms system late at night.

This? It’s a threat. I caused this…

Felicity’s eyes are all over the pair, hoping hopelessly that she hasn’t wrecked permanent damage between them but way Sara’s looking at him makes Felicity think that not only is she spot on, it’s an unprecedented move in their relationship. Oliver intimating a threat. To Sara.

“I don’t care.” It’s so quiet and deadly it makes Thea stare at him. “You only heard what you wanted to hear.” His voice low, he finally drops the hand keeping Sara where she is. Exhaustion reeks from him then, but there’s also this… strength. As if he’s become unmoveable. “We’ve done this before,” his eyes flicker hesitantly to Thea, Felicity – because no one notices that her breathing has escalated or that her heart is still racing - taking the chance to slowly place her hands behind her on the support, “with Roy.” Thea blinks at that and you can practically see the cogs turning. “You made a hasty decision then, one you would have bitterly regretted.”

“I still don’t regret that decision.” Sara interrupts and Oliver just looks at her. And there’s the real lover’s word imprinted on his face.

Disappointment.

“Wait…” Its Thea’s turn as her eyes flicker form her brother to his girlfriend. “That was you, wasn’t it? The Canary? You pointed a gun at Roy earlier. And then you,” her eyes hit her brother’s, “you stopped her.” Disbelief makes her take a step back from the woman who helped her off the floor. Again, Sara looks like she’s been smacked in the face. “You were going to kill him. Kill Roy.”

“It was~”
“No! Is Felicity the same as Roy? Is that why you-”

“Thea, please-”

“If she is then we should be helping her; not trying to kill her!” And if Felicity wasn’t already feeling affectionate for the sibling then would be now, except a boatload of guilt is heaped with it. *It may have been an accident but… what about next time? Am I dangerous? Like Roy was?*

Thea looks to her brother. “She saved us.” As if it’s the answer to everything.

“I know.” He replies, as if he agrees.

But he’s already looking at her again, at her hands, which are poised and primed behind her. To do what, she doesn’t know. “Hey.” He murmurs. “Come here.” And his hand lifts, beckons, his eyes are asking – damn near begging – her to come away from the bannister. “Felicity.”

It doesn’t matter than her heartbeat feels like it might ricochet off her ribcage, she feels like maybe, just maybe, she can move her hand and it twitches behind her, shifts. He sees it if his slight smile is anything to go by.

But then Thea suddenly speaks. “Wait; aren’t you friends?” She’s pointing between Sara and Felicity.

Feeling cornered again she tries to breathe normally, managing to force out a word. “Yes.”

Sara doesn’t respond. Doesn’t give Felicity a *thing.*

Breathe in, breathe out… *right. This is so not my night.*

Oliver takes a step closer-

Suddenly, for no reason she can fathom – her body is driving stick – she braces herself fully on the bannister and leaps off towards the ground floor, very aware again that she’s wearing no underwear
and thankful that she didn’t flash anyone on the way down. Including Oliver. She lands in a crouch and stays there for exactly 3 seconds; it feels like an eternity and too much happens at once.

“Oh my god.”

Thea.

“Wait, Ollie! You’re knee.”

Sara.

Feet pounding against the polished flooring makes her head shoot up in surprise as John skirts round the corner, pistol out, raised and pointed at her face.

“Whoa!” He shouts, shocked, his gun immediately coming down. “I thought…”

He thought there’d been a fight. Or an issue. Hearing a body hit the floor would do that to you. Unfortunately it’s also what sends a further surge of panic through Felicity Smoak. So as he steps forwards to – his eyes bright with relief at seeing her – she shoots up from her crouch, startling him.

“Felicity-”

“Wait.”

It’s Oliver.

He’s coming down the stairs, a hand raised out to Diggle. “Don’t.”

And she’s sprinting before another word is spoken. It’s the third time in the past 12 hours that she’s towards or away from him.
They’re exchanging shouts behind her but she can’t focus on it, not on anything except the bizarre yet increasingly destructive impulse to be outside and away from people.

Flying down corridors and past staircases, her breath coming in loud pants, Felicity barely manages to stop herself before she crashes into a revolving door, instead flattening her palms against it and forcing it to swing opposite herself – the kitchen should lead outside; even in a house like this there’s always a door leading to the backyard and here there will probably be grounds the size of stadiums -

A startled cry cuts off her thought and she staggers to a halt, slipping across white floor tiles that are surprisingly mild in temperature. And sees Raisa who she met several times before and who looks like she was about to step through the same door with a tray off to the side filled with a teapot, orange juice and water and another tray filled with sandwiches, pastries, toast and sticky porridge. They’re waiting to be placed on a trolley.

Er...

They both blink at each other, “Sorry,” I mean, I have zero clue what to do here and boy- does she have the sweetest eyes I’ve ever seen, and then her brain revolts again as a shot of panic stirs her to keep moving, to find an escape. She turns just as she sees the kindly woman open her mouth to speak, bolting for the back of the room, hands slapping against the windows until she sees the back door almost hidden down the side of the long kitchen island. Her hand is grasping the handle before she can blink, pulling it open, enjoying the early morning breeze on her face - there’s a hint of rainfall in the air – just needing to not. Be. Near. People-

Then he’s there.

He’s right there.

With her. Before her thoughts can hurt her.

A murmur.

“Hey.”

Her initial thought – and deep frack it all because it was just an instinctive twist on what her usual
reaction would be (to scream shrilly) – is to twist away from him but he’s everywhere-

“Sshh, shh, shh, shh.” His breath’s on her face and in her hair and-

Dammit; it works.

And then his arms are tight around her, coming round from behind. She’s crushed back into his large, warm chest before she can respond, lifting her slightly from the floor. But she’s fighting for freedom too – heart in her throat, the image of Sara’s eyes in her mind - her hands grasping at his arms, trying to push down and it hits her fleetingly that for all her Mirakuru enhancements… she can’t use them against Oliver. So the gesture is a mute one.

His voice is raw. “Please.” How can she fight against that? “Stop.” He almost loses her on a desperate attempt from her to force herself forwards and away but he hauls her back. “Stop fighting me. Felicity.”

It hurts but still, she tries again.

When his hands shift fast to grip hers, entangling them so that they can’t push or tear he swiftly moves them back around her front, and he’s talking to her, “it’s okay,” an arm below across her ribcage and one overlapping her chest, his hand securing hers over breasts as he curves his broad shoulders against her own much smaller set.

“I’m here.” He says. “I’m right here.”

And she’s done; she’s settled, squished against him… but she can move if she wishes. If she wants to get free, all she has to do is force him back. But it would hurt him and if she’s honest with herself – no point stopping now – she doesn’t want him to let go.

Because when he touched her, her skin sang and she felt like she could breathe again. Her heartbeat, which had spun out of control, started to align itself with his own, reaching out between her shoulder blades to the body pressed against her.

God, stop this Felicity…
But she can’t.

She can feel his thighs taught against hers and it’s a delicious shiver of a feeling – like falling into chocolate -, her hips secured firmly at his abdominals as a leg pushes gently between her own.

Exposure.

Wearing no underwear, the material of his pants accidentally strokes over her, right there – a frictionless burn – and she’s biting her bottom lip as her eyes fall closed. And he’s not even trying.

She wants to feel those thighs, both of them… between her own, as they shift and thrust and grit and push her own high above them-

No, she tries to shake herself – this isn’t right: he’s your friend – but he makes it almost impossible when his fingers carelessly stroke heat over hers, the index finger of his right unknowingly brushing over the side of her breast as he does so. A weightless sensation accompanies the feeling when his face turns into hers; his nose scoping a path over her neck as his chin and jaw sit between the column of her throat and shoulder.

“Breathe with me.” He says in her ear.

I am.

“There you go…”

Her eyes finally open and it’s so nice being there in his arms but… she can’t stay with him. “Oliver.”

“It’s alright.” His scruff against her neck, the hum of his tone sends tendrils of pleasure over her skin, the prickle of those hairs making her shiver; another reminder of her lack of suitable attire.

“I’m sorry.” She swallows. “I’m really-”
“Thea’s fine.” Soft lips unintentionally trace her cheek and she doesn’t dare turn her head. “You didn’t do anything.”

“But what-” She tries and he presses her back firmer, her bottom feeling every inch of him and, *woo; holy crap; the man is a god-

“But nothing.”

Her eyes narrow; how could he be so obstinate at a time like this? “I’m infected.” Squeezing his fingers between her own she emphasizes by clenching just a tad harder than she normally would. “With Mirakuru.”

“I know.”

It’s sad and his breath is so warm… she shakes her head, her hair pooling over her face. “I’m sorry.” Because it was never meant to happen. “I can go; I’ll go right now, your family will-”

“Hey.” By now that one word between them was a language unto itself. “Hey, stop. Look at me.”

And when she resists Oliver pushes his face, his nose and stubble against the skin behind her ear, damn near nuzzling her. “Felicity.” It’s barely a whisper, barely a word, but it’s *everything* and it makes her soften – defenceless against him as she always was – and she knows he feels it as his lips nudge at her...

Because he relaxes fully. Into her. Over her.

“You saved us.” Muscles clenching he tugs at her, stressing his words. “You got *hurt* saving us. I’m just glad you’re awake.”

Feeling the ‘guilt arrow’ fast approaching Felicity opens her mouth, ready to destroy the new notch on his ever-present post of remorse but he continues. “I know: your life. Your choice.”

“You already thanked me.” She breathes.
“It’ll never be enough.”

*Please don’t... “Oliver-”*

“I don’t want it to be.”

...*What?*

It’s a rough mumble, his face slowly declining to fit at her throat and his leg moves between her own – a gasp from her lost between them – as he breathes deep. “I don’t want it to ever be enough. I don’t ever want to stop.”

*Stop what?* And it’s a panting wait for him to continue but, just as she knows that if she prodded him further he’d close up she also knows that he won’t finish.

And she has bigger concerns.

Her hand delicately extricates from his and – sensing she doesn’t mean to flee – he lets it go.

His own hand lands back where it previously lay.

Above her breast.

It’s hot and heavy and it makes the blood in her body focus on him like a shark. Her hand falls to her side and hesitantly – as his fingers trail tenderness over the barely covered skin there, experimenting and probably not realising quite yet that he was feeling her up – before her eyes can roll back into her head at the *want* coursing through her, she grasps his thigh beside hers.

He stills, the rough material of his pants shifting and she licks her lips when his head moves incrementally out from her neck. *Say it.* “Oliver I, er…”
He hasn’t moved – his muscles are locked tight. Hasn’t breathed – those pleasant puffs of air an
erotic contradiction to the heat of his arms and the cold air at her thighs. She can feel his eyes on
her – it’s an intensity of intangible consistencies that she’s missed these past months – and she
won’t, can’t, allow it to stop her. She’s too strong for that. So she turns her head so that her eyes
can meet his.

And feels every drop of warmth, the blood pounding its course in her veins travel down, down, to
the place where his leg is so perfectly positioned.

*I’ve never seen his eyes look that...* Not even when sparring with Sara. Or when he shared his
thoughts on Helena.

Suddenly it’s too much again and she’s speaking – oh good – before she can stop herself. “I’m not
wearing any underwear.”

There’s a moment of silence so deafening, her heartbeat is the only sound she hears. Then he
speaks and, wow, it’s breathy. Isn’t that usually my thing? “What?”

It’s difficult, it really is, when your arms are locked by the man of your dreams and he’s just
looking at you and… “I-I didn’t have any underwear to put on and Thea was about to help me
but…” Her eyes shoot down to his leg and back up to his face. “I really need you to move your
thigh.”

*Before I do something – a lot of things – I might regret. Or not regret.*

Literally two inches from her face, Oliver’s own is startling in its intensity. She can clearly see
when the muscles there quiver and fix into place. He wets his lips and her eyes immediately flit to
there, watching transfixed as a shaky exhale leaves him. “My leg…”

“…Yeah; your leg.” Since when was she whispering? “Between mine.” And she shouldn’t, she
really shouldn’t, but can’t seem to help when her eyes stay riveted on his – they’re so dark -
waiting.

His mouth is open and the lids of his eyes flicker. Almost a flutter. “I’m… I’m sorry…”

And she smiles – it’s like a tear drop. “It’s okay.”
Maybe it’s that they’re both okay all of a sudden; achingly tender and hesitant smiles exchanged and it marks the air with awareness so powerful and untouched – untouched because neither had ever let themselves step to this precipice before – that it causes them to simply… feel.

To allow themselves a moment where they simply can.

Even though he’s with Sara.

Even though she’s infected.

It doesn’t seem to matter.

All Felicity knows is the feel of him and how natural it is for him to fit around every bend and curve of hers, how he seems to infiltrate her senses and seep into her bones. Strengthening her.

She’s never getting over this. And she doesn’t care, doesn’t want to. Not for the world will she. Ever. Forget. This.

And she knows that… he’s might be discovering something of his own. A beautiful second of possibility because the fingers of his hand – the one fastened to her chest – stretch, just missing her utterly sensitised nipple, stopping suddenly as he realises. The awareness is alive and kicking once more. It takes a minute but his hand eventually drags across her skin, a long goodbye, until it falls berefit by his side leaving his other across her ribs.

A deep exhale on his part pushes her own chest out and, for some reason, his eyes close and his head moves forwards until his nose brushes along her face before their cheeks finally press together.

His next breath is more a sound than a breath; a very quiet… moan.

Oliver.
"You're here."

He says it as if...

So close she can’t really see his face except the outline in her peripheral… but it’s damaging. She’ll carry this with her for the rest of her life, to peruse and overuse in her dreams. The way his brow line isn’t fractured, how his jaw isn’t clenched and how the simple smoothness of his musculature indicates that he feels… comfortable. *Safe.*

*Wow…*

Her mouth opens but there’s nothing to say and she knows she looks devastated. How her eyes take him in and scream affection. Those eyes close, feeling his right hand touch her own. And linger.

But it’s not enough suddenly.

So she lifts that same hand – her other is still interlocked like an Ouroboros with his left – bringing it up close to his face beside hers. Tentatively, with the odd jerk of hesitation, her fingertips trespass there, over skin not hers to touch.

He doesn’t pull away.

And then it’s all hers to explore: a three day scruff that feels delightful against the pads of her index and middle finger, how her thumb caresses the underside of his jaw as the rest of those nimble investigators chase away demons he’d been haunted by throughout the night.

When he sighs she can’t help that her eyes close or that her fingers slide further up the bone until her palm covers his jaw… and the small indentation before his lips is *right* there-

“Long night.” He eventually mutters.

“Isn’t it though?” Her head comes to rest against his. “You didn’t sleep did you?”
He huffs a dry chuckle. “Not a wink.”

**Understandable.**

“…Guys.”

**Annnnnnnnnnd** they’re back. From a long, truly divine sojourn into no man’s land, better known as the ‘forbidden territory’ that Felicity never thought she’d traverse with Oliver Queen of all people.

It’s a moment where they both freeze… until Oliver pulls away from her. Face first. Then arm… then body. She practically feels the distance between them, the space where his isn’t any more like a gaping hole in the structure of her foundation.

It’s a moment of absolute reality.

**Yep: he’s not mine. He’s taken.** And they both knew it. So why…

His hand places itself on her shoulder though and her resulting need to cry a little prompts her to remember: it’s been a while.

“Dig.” He says, voice quiet.

Her head whips round and yes, there’s her best friend.

…Who was registering everything in his vision: those eyes didn’t miss a step.

**Uh oh.**

But there’s zero judgement there. He’s standing in the doorway, looking more than a little tired, more than a little uncertain to approach – oh John - but those amazing brown eyes found her first. They were big, encompassing and it made her want to hug him. Badly. But, yeah. No underwear.
Trying to look completely unaffected by – oh I don’t know – everything, Felicity crossed her arms over her chest, hiding her visible lack of bra, clearing her throat. “Hey John.”

“Hey you.” He just looks… pleased. Then there’s changes in his jaw, his mouth pursing slightly like he’s chewing, as if he’s ruminating. Huh? His eyes reach Oliver again. “Everything okay here?”

The hand on her shoulder squeezes slightly. “Yeah…”

“Good. Because we’ve got company: Laurel just showed up.”

And Felicity blinks because, what? It isn’t even six in the morning yet.

The furrow between Oliver’s brow returns and suddenly she’s jealous of their stolen moment because it wasn’t long enough. “Why?” But then fear drops like a stone in his expression. “Slade? Did he-”

“She knows Oliver.” John shakes his head and a worm of apprehension curls in Felicity’s gut at the look on his face. “She knows you’re the Arrow.”

Mouth opened, mouth closed… “How?” Felicity asks when Oliver becomes a statue beside her.

“Don’t know.” Diggle’s shoulder attempt to shrug but it looks more like a slump than anything else. “She wouldn’t say without speaking to Oliver first.”

Of course.

Laurel… and Oliver.

Right.
Part 9

“Ollie…?”

Laurel.

He took in a breath, hands and fingers coming up to press against the skin under the bridge of his nose, an instinctive awareness of who was in the room with him fluxing like a drum behind his eyes with every beat of his pulse.

Not. Now.

The universe never listened to him.

He was so, so tired.

A part of him very much done with it all.

The night disappearing beyond the horizon, it was all becoming retrospective: Slade, the brutal discovery that Sara’s self-destructive flights of capricious fancy where actually an inner reconciliation of her instinctive self, her nihilistic nature… and Felicity not being there, throughout, as a pillar. A constant.

Now that the danger and distress of the evening – for the most part – was coming to a close, he was ready to rest. Seeing her awake had given him the ‘okay’. To just… be.

So this wasn’t the time for Laurel to be here; he didn’t want her involved, he’d never wanted her involved, wanted her kept safe and away from all of this… which was absolutely why Slade had told her everything. Of course it was.

But just how much did Slade tell her?

That he was the Arrow?

A man Laurel had once idolised, become besotted in, had been frightened of, had hated, had then needed once again… and was now indifferent to?

Why is she here then? Maybe… because of Sara? He spent no illusions on the idea that she’d come due to any reprising feelings from a romance gone and long forgotten. Since returning to Starling he’d learned much in the way of what he wanted as opposed to what he truly needed…

Unfortunately, surprisingly, ironically, sorely… Laurel featured in neither category.

It was a painful truth - he’d spent so many months after his return pining after the idea of them together that it took the cost of Tommy’s life to show him that sometimes what you think is best for you, can turn out to be the exact opposite.

Case in point: they’d slept together… then he’d had to leave her in bed, lying to her once more because – and he could finally admit it – he’d never had any intention of telling her his secret.
And then she’d ignored his advice to stay out of the Glades; something he knew still plagued her sleep. It left a bitter, what was it all for, taste in the mouth.

But really, what had it all been for? One night with Laurel? When neither were anywhere near close to being ‘together’ in more than just a physical sense. Had it been worth the sacrifice?

…Looking back on it, the answer was hard to deliver because he knew that it was ‘no’.

Undoubtedly, it had been the first time he’d ever truly made love to Laurel. And how insulting was that? Could you measure it in an ‘Asshole’ metre? It still made him wince; in all their time together before the island he’d never truly been with her. And then after that half night… he hadn’t considered the consequences, hadn’t experienced enough to know himself quite that well.

Going back to Lian Yu had forced him, in dreams, to confront the royally skewed nature of those few hours. After he’d woken, nothing had changed. Only months later could he see the problem in that and realised that he’d actually expected, secretly - at the time, to wake and feel different. To feel altered, to be… more. Stronger. Lighter. A better man, a better person.

Complete.

But that hadn’t happened. Instead he’d woken to feeling exactly as he’d done the day before. Being together didn’t fix their past.

They had no more history left to spoil.

Yet however much he tried to tell that to the sensitive spot on his spine, the area that always tightened - close to genuinely painful - whenever someone he cared about was in danger, it ignored him making his stomach to writhe at the possibility of someone else being in danger because of him.

Was Laurel in danger? Is that why Slade told her? To push her back into my orbit…

To tell me that he’d chosen a target?

The amount of times Slade had caught Oliver staring at Laurel’s picture in those first few months, it made a regretful sort of sense.

It was a stunning reality: five years of living through nightmares, tyrants, pain, murder, death, suffering, loneliness’, self-loathing, the island, China, Russia, Coast City… he’d carried her with him. One year back in Starling and he’d let her go. He loved her, but he’d let her go. There were no good feelings in it for him to celebrate; it had been necessary on both sides. The art of loving and being loved… it could extinguish as well as build.

Had he ever really loved her as he should have? Had she ever loved him back the way he’d wanted her to?

The picture of her that he’d originally carried in his wallet had been found on the floor of the foundry after the fall of the Glades. Passing a homeless man’s fire-bin that same evening he’d dropped it in, watching the burning embers eat away at her image before walking away.

Now? There were times were he thought that simple friendship might too difficult a hurdle to grasp. And there were moments where Laurel resembled broken glass: fractured and hostile to the touch. She’d been through much; he’d put her through much… but no matter what happened he would always care for her, would always be there for her.
…Which she must have known, given her reaction to seeing him pass the lounge.

She’d hugged him. Just bypassed everything else and thrown herself in his arms. He knew what it was like to hug Laurel but something felt different.

And one of his arms had been occupied at the time…

Their slow pace down the corridor towards the stairs could have gone faster… could have, but hadn’t. And it wasn’t because he was tired, not this time. It was the silence he enjoyed, the type that came with mutual understanding. The three of them, the ones who started everything… they knew each other well enough, deeply enough, to not have to utter a word. It was comfortable. Familiar. Relaxing.

Then he’d caught sight of Laurel ahead of them.

She’d stepped out into the hall; her dark suit jacket undone – the only sign of her current ruffled state – her hair down and tousled from the wind, her chest almost heaving, as if emotional…

Something must have happened. His brow furrowed. Who had Slade hurt now?

But then she shouted out to him.

“Ollie!”

Her eyes bright and, emotional, she was looking at him like… like the world had turned on its head and he was the only thing that fell into place. Like he made sense, which was probably the most confusing thing about seeing her right then.

For all his weaknesses, a poor memory was never one of them. And Oliver had never seen Laurel look at him like that before.

From his point of view it was like looking into the eyes of a friend and seeing a stranger.

What was it Dig had said? That she knew he was the Arrow? Dig had mentioned it was the first thing that Laurel had led with when he’d opened the front doors, gun behind his back, not ten minutes before.

But yes, that expression once upon a time would have thrilled him to the core. Not anymore.

Laurel… when had they become like this? It was the same question he’d pondered over with Sara. And had come to the exact same conclusion…

And then she was moving. She didn’t run to him but her long legs and quick strides made easy work of the distance between them.

Stunned, he held out an arm and his other, which had been pressed against Felicity’s back, was wrenched off and he actually stumbled as Laurel all but landed on his chest. A quick eyebrow raise from Dig confirmed that he had and that he was pushing thin ice: his knee needed to be checked again. Soon.

“I heard.” She said pulling back, eyes expressively wide. “You were kidnapped? You’re driver was murdered.”

Spoken so honestly, innocently, he wasn’t altogether certain that he was happy that she didn’t know everything; it made explaining things - whilst skirting through the debris field of old hurts
and secrets he still didn’t want her in on - so much more irritating. Maybe that had been Slade’s point: to make life that extra bit more difficult for him.

But there was something else about Laurel right now that made him pause, something that gave him an odd mix of feelings and he wasn’t sure if they were good or bad.

She was looking at him like… Like she believed. In him.

When she never had before.

For two years her emotions involving him had run riot, often taking his along for a ride – one he’d sometimes started - that never ended smoothly. But now… now there was nothing but calm in her eyes. Surprise too, some awe, which he wasn’t comfortable with, affection, but also a boatload of belief that he didn’t quite understand.

Her gaze was fixed on him.

“Laurel, why are you here?”

Again, it didn’t immediately hit him that he’d uttered the same words to Sara hours earlier. His brain had been on repeat since then and it was surreal to him that he’d use the same tone here.

“My dad. He said that you’d been attacked.” Something changed in her expression when she pressed forward, as if she were testing. “And when he mentioned Slade, the same man who told me who you really are, I figured it was time.”

Oliver blinked. “Time for what?”

“For us to talk. About you. About your secret. I think it’s time, don’t you?”

Right now?

…Honestly?

No.

His eyes flickered, a little stumped on what to say.

There was only ever a single moment in time where he’d wanted to fully tell Laurel his secret. Just one moment.

“There’s no way you’re this vigilante, because he’s actually trying to make a difference. We both know that’s not really your style.”

Right then as he’d looked at the back of her head, for a delightful second in time he’d fantasised about telling her, just to see the wonder, the fear – a tantalising emotion to tweak, it bordered closely to capricious desire – and the passion, the jubilation that might erupt on her face…that maybe she’d see him differently and might want to learn more about who he really was. Is. Yet he’d understood why she didn’t view him with much else other than scorn, the history between them making it difficult to do anything but remember the mistakes – to regret – the past.

And the urge was long gone.

Now there were currently more important things in his life to consider than what laurel Lance thought of his overall life plan.
One of those things was standing so quietly beside him.

When he reached out, blindly, to touch her – I’m here – she was a step further away than before. Frowning, already knowing something was off, he turned to look at her and Felicity as still as a statue.

He moved to speak; mouth open and restless - he needed to see her relaxed, needed to see her feeling safe - but he stopped before any words could come out.

Her arms crossed were her over chest. She’s cold. It was understandable; she wasn’t… lips pressed together, he breathed deeply through his nose… She isn’t wearing underwear. The thought forced his eyes to shut tight because, God help him; he was never going to sleep again. Ever.

But she was also staring into the corner wall.

Features hesitant but already knowing what he’d find, Oliver’s eyes went to the spot.

Nothing. There was nothing there.

This isn’t fair. More than a little anger made his fingers twitch and he fisted his hands. He looked back at her, knowing she was seeing something he couldn’t hope to. The madness of Mirakuru. A madness he would have gladly taken upon himself… but she’d had to be the hero.

There was… an incredibly small part of him, a part he despised that wished she hadn’t been there tonight. That she hadn’t been brave enough to put herself in harm’s way… for him. Because it was for him. He wasn’t an idiot. And neither was she.

There is no repayment. I will never repay her for it… which means I’ll spend my whole life trying.

How twisted was it, really, that the thought made him so incredibly… content?

Had he ever been content before? It must feel like this. Had to. Like giving yourself unto another’s space, a free-fall, letting them hook strings into your system for their control and caprice and - please let this be it. Let this be my life. Let everything I’ve been through be made for this. It’ll all have been worth it then.

For her.

What an amazing way to live.

And it was also why; when he finally stopped Slade… it could go either way.

He’d made a promise, yes. But for Oliver, what was happening, even just here – in this moment – was a certifiable death sentence for the man who used to be his comrade, a brother.

She’s so still. He could see each strand of hair glint in the rising sun. Sometimes, animals in their natural habitat would freeze in the abrupt apparition of a predator, or any mammal higher up the food chain. It was why she, in a very primal sense, reminded him now of a deer. A doe.

There were many things they still didn’t know about Mirakuru. And it was already something he couldn’t stand, that she looked so alone, so… in her own head.

But she isn’t. I’m right here.

It was time she knew that.
In his peripheral Laurel stood, confusion etched into her skin; he hadn’t answered her question. It was something he was sorry for but couldn’t remedy; that all he ever did and still does is confound her. Licking his lips, watching as Felicity just continued to gaze at something he didn’t, couldn’t see, her eyes were wide and without the glasses on the bridge of her nose he could clearly see the distress she’d tried so hard to hide.

He didn’t like that.

So his hand reached out to touch her, a slow descent – some hesitance before skilled fingers touched cool skin, trailing slowly down her arm until he reached her wrist – making him question why such a simple thing could shake and steady the earth beneath his feet all at once. Could tighten the muscles at his breast bone and make him dizzy with the genuine need to just… sleep. Near her. With her. Close to him, inside his skin-

“We’ll be down in a minute.” He decided to say, turning smoothly to glance at Laurel. “We need to change.” Staring so fixedly at the wall his words brought Felicity back to life. He tried, failed, not to smile, however wearily, at the –almost-a-spasm-but-not-head-whip she managed to pull off.

Practically gawking, she attempted speech. “E-er, you don’t have to come with me. I can-”

He just pulled her with him when he stepped towards the stairs.

“He just pulled her with him when he stepped towards the stairs.

“Come on.” He said softly.

It was the whisper of a thrill.

They didn’t do this. Him and Felicity. They reassured, they comforted with small gestures and they approached without sensitivity for the any boundaries the other possessed. Knowing a person completely, being in their company 24/7... eventually you stopped walking on egg shells.

This was different.

It was against both spoken and unspoken rules – that he couldn’t allow himself to be with someone, to grow so attached and in need of a person who he could really care about, who he could really devote himself to – a foundation he’d created once he’d understood that for all his searching for the right partner, his soul had already decided on one. Not weeks ago, or months... maybe years.

His brain and his heart just hadn’t been in the same ring yet.

But now, taking in her shirt – his shirt – which barley covered to mid-thigh, there was soft skin everywhere – he knew now just how soft it was, what kind of soft it was - and locks of hair bouncing in such a way that made want to just curl his fingers through them. And he knew how he sounded, how he looked as his thumb painted words over her knuckles.

He tilted his head towards the stair case. “My room.”

Yes…

The material of her top had closed him to nothing. Against her body… it was so strange.

Holding women, being held by them: it wasn’t new to him. Far from it. But it had never felt like that before. Like a key fitting into a lock. Sure, her form was enticing, as only a woman’s body could be but also… safe. He hadn’t known he’d needed to feel safe. He’d just wanted to hear her heartbeat against his. To know that she was alive and healthy – as healthy as she could possibly be – and with him there, in that moment.
She had been.

Do whatever it takes

It had been impossible after that moment to not see her. Again.

Being with Sara... it allowed a measure of need to be quelled; it allowed him not to venture beyond strawberry-blond curls, athleticism and all the things he understood. And not ask for more. To not crave... something else.

But after Felicity told him the right thing at the right time, exactly what he’d needed to hear... the need to go to her more often, to seek her counsel, to wonder at the future became far more difficult to quell.

That night, after she and Dig had helped him realise that the earth hadn’t turned so far off its axis, that even though Thea was in pain and Roy had left, they still had a chance to rectify the situation. Instead of sinking into Sara, instead of finding comfort in the lie of commitment they shared and instead of spending a few hours with her in transitory physical satisfaction, he’d needed his team. They’d started all of this. Sara... would come and go. Maybe Roy would too.

But them?

John Diggle.

Felicity Smoak...

They were his family. A family not defined by the blood they didn’t share, but by the heart that they had split in three.

“Dad’s taken over the crime scene.” As if in a dream, Laurel’s voice trailed over him like it was coming from a distance. He knew she was looking at him. Waiting. “He’s notified your driver’s next of kin.”

“Thank you Laurel.”

His mother.

Dignified and surprisingly unruffled by the amount of leather clad – Dig and Sara – people in the room, his mother sat in her cotton pyjama’s. He’d blinked at the sight as he’s entered the lounge: when was the last time she’d even worn bed clothes outside of the bedroom?

But right now?

“Oliver, man...” Diggle muttered, quietly, seeming to understand that his friend was pretty close to his emotional limit. “We need at least a rough plan before we go get some shut eye.”

...Right now he wasn’t there. With them.

He wasn’t with Sara – as he had been for most of the night, trying to explain what she would never understand, and now regretted - who hadn’t looked away from the floor. He wasn’t with Thea, who was curled up like a cat on one of the sofa’s closest to the entrance. Nor was he with his mother who’d been watching him with a careful eye since he’d started pacing.

He might have been with Diggle if his brain hadn’t other plans. And he absolutely wasn’t where Laurel wanted him right now: to give her the attention she’d been waiting for, the explanation she
needed to hear.

Because he was with Felicity who was currently on the phone in another room.

How much would they mind if he just left the room with her? Did he even care right then?

He did… he wished he didn’t. What was more, he wished she’d just… come to him. If not sit, then come to him. Give him the excuse to hold her again.

Opening his top drawer he grabbed the first pair he found, clearing his throat. “Here.”

It was hardly spoken; less than a murmur, more than a whisper.

They’d entered his room and it was like switching off a faucet. Every emotion, every feeling and instinct present multiplied, condensed and compressed into a tight bubble around them that could snap under the pressure. Tension clawed at his spine, urged his hands to move, to grasp, to just. Do. Something… but they weren’t alone. Dig was right there, at the door. Worried about her.

It was a rare moment when Oliver wanted Dig elsewhere. It was an impossible moment where he found himself wanting to touch her in the way his mind was feeding him now.

He hadn’t been alone with her yet. He needed that. To be with her and just her. So that he could… he didn’t know. Understand? Settle? He didn’t know what he needed to do. Just that he needed to be alone. With Felicity.

“I messed up your sheets.” She muttered, her expression a wince, with a knee lifting to lean on the mattress to get a good look at how much blood was actually on them.

His mouth opened. Closed… opened.

“It’s fine.”

He wasn’t paying attention as he normally would.

All his eyes could see right then as they trailed over her – in his grasp his briefs dangled inanely - all Oliver could compute was her shape. The profile of her thighs as the muscles there flexed, the tresses of her hair as they fell about her face – he’d never realised that her curls where so natural – and how her form curved in some movements and relaxed in others. How her spine stirred, the air feeling close, as if there were a lack of oxygen…

How tiny her feet were.

For some reason that made him swallow.

Comparatively speaking he engulfed her completely. And yet it never seemed to matter, how small or how big she was: her core strength alone, that indomitable will of hers made her appear at times, taller than Laurel, tougher than Sara. Stronger than Dig. But durable than himself.

She looked… so deserving of love.

It took a moment before he could speak again. “Raisa’s here. She’ll clean it.”

She looked up at him and it took every ounce of strength he had not to hold her again when her head tilted and her gaze fell on him. When she slowly stepped back from the bed – a bed he’d never be able to sleep in again – and when her hands fidgeted together.
Again he lifted his underwear, no longer quite so self-conscious. “Here.” He reiterated.

He also didn’t step closer. Didn’t dare move. Didn’t quite trust himself just then.

As though pulled out of a mental spell Felicity’s head gave a little jilt – not quite a shake – and she breathed a small, insecure attempt at laughter. “Right.” And when she walked over to him he didn’t stare at how his shirt rose higher on her thighs with each step. In fact he made it a point to look down, lips pressing together.

“Thanks.” He felt, more than saw her take them. His briefs.

She was going to wear his briefs.

Even Sara hadn’t worn his underwear before.

Or Laurel.

Furtively he glanced at her, catching the ‘knowing’ on her face and knew she was thinking the same; how intimate a situation this really shouldn’t be... but was.

It really was.

His eyes dropped to her throat when he saw it work.

“So...”

Blue met blue... and he allowed himself a moment to take in the fact that she wasn’t blushing, that her voice had dropped an octave... and that she wasn’t asking him to turn around.

Instead she simply opened his briefs and brought them down to her knees – he breathed deep, long; his eyes following her movements - and opened them up to step inside, lifting one leg... then another... and he watched – admittedly he couldn’t not. His gaze hit her thighs and refused to leave. Stop it. Now. It’s Felicity.

Yet...

Stupidly mesmerised by her display of skin before him she very simply pulled the material up her bare thighs.

It wasn’t simple. Or normal.

As much as Felicity obviously enjoyed wearing skirts, they were never too high. Why? She had a strong sense of self-worth, more than enough for her not to put herself on display for any man or reason: Felicity wore skirts as a statement, a sense of identity. She knew who and why she was the way she was. He also knew a great deal of it was directly due to the amount of unmitigated hostility she’d received, daily, for how fast she’d climbed the ranks at work.

Right here, in this room, she wasn’t wearing anything under that shirt of his.

Slowly, he swallowed. It had nothing to do with saliva.

No panties. No tights or stockings – she’d never needed to wear them; her legs were phenomenal – she was completely exposed.

And trusting him.
But it didn’t feel like something as normal as trusting him.

It felt… for one unspeakably affecting and unthinkably dangerous second… like an invitation.

Every muscle – an inevitable spread of heat fixating from the throat, travelling like a warm hand across his chest, a constricting flood of fire shooting across his abdominals, a tension rolling further down, circling, tightening inner muscles until a burn through his crotch gripped him – tightened. Every. Single. One.

It was too intense a reaction to push away.

And completely unexpected.

Because the feeling truly was based on their complete trust in the other.

Trust equalling to passion? That wasn’t something he’d really experienced before with a woman. That trust could be a turn on.

A wordless sound left him before he could stop it and he was sure he looked wrecked – knew that his eyes were drinking her in; dilated, tired and probably more than a little pitiful as they begged silent pleas for something he hadn’t the courage to confess – and his tweaked out hair that he’d ran his fingers through a few thousand times during the night exposed his worry, that his jeans and shirt suddenly felt unwelcome when all he really wanted to do was fall into the warmth in front of him and rest.

God…

How had he not seen this, understood what this was months ago?

With every fantasy he’d pushed away, that every dream that wasn’t a nightmare featured her?

She made him feel at home in his own skin.

Like… it was okay to be exactly who he was, without any alterations.

By the way she’d halted as she’d slipped his briefs to her hips – and all he could think about was the soft band sitting loosely there on her hips, the image pulling at the back of his neck – told him she’d heard the noise he’d made. The want. The shock of it.

He watched her finally straighten, glimpsed how his top fell on her; just covering the area where her hips ended when her eyes found his.

Fingers curling in on themselves, his tongue once again licked his lips. “Felicity…”

Her eyes flickered between his before this amazingly bright smile erupted on her face. “I’m wearing your underwear.” She bit her lip.

She was embarrassed?

Steadily, warmth crawled up his neck and for the first time, in a long while, he smiled back, showing teeth. The tension between them didn’t fade, it simply… became bearable.

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“How about Sara…” His mouth snapped shut: it had just slipped out.

“I should have expected it.” She was still smiling but it was muted and he wanted so desperately to make her beam again. “For all your worry about Slade, Sara’s the one who’s scared of him.”
“There’s reason to be scared of him.”

Her eyes were warm. “But you’re scared of what he’ll do.” She answered, softly. “She’s scared of who he is.”

True.

He found his thumb and index finger brushing together again... only this time the shirt she was wearing was between them.

How did that get there?

“It’s been a while since I wore briefs.”

He blinked.

A red blush was spreading across her cheeks. “Not that I wear them! Ever.”

“You...” He breathed, shaking his head and just laughing. “Y-you’ve worn men’s underwear before?”

He needed this.

Eyes; wide, they flickered to their surroundings. His trick. “No.” But then she was grinning too, eyes closing and admitting. “Maybe. Once. It was a long time ago.” She shook her head. “College is a wilderness of weirdo behaviour.”


Her gaze flew open and locked one; brows shooting to her fringe line – and she didn’t really have one. “You what?”

He really had – the story was a very common one too. “Yeah.” And he knew that his grin held zero mortification.

She mouthed, “No.”

He mimed back. “Yep.” Biting down on his lip, eyes narrowing impishly he continued in a whisper. “Pretty sure there’s a picture somewhere.”

“Oh my god!” It was like music, her laughter. Then the look on her face became so not innocent and he wanted very much to touch her again. “And how did that feel?”

Still smiling... he simply tilted his head sideways. “Don’t remember.”

It didn’t compare – any of his memories before the island – to what was going on right then and there.

Having Diggle outside the room meant they had little to zero time: people were waiting for them. So he offered her his other fleece from the overnight bad parked forevermore under the bed he never slept in. This one was green. And looked decidedly too good on her: so good that he almost stopped to take her in his arms again, to take a picture, to admire her up close in his colours. Instead he stared as she rolled up the sleeves before clearing his throat to go.

Moments later she was fielding a call from Caitlin Snow and he watched her walk away.
But it remained. The warmth remained. Held him up. Still felt along his spine - tingling in his fingers, present in his bones, a phantom behind his eyes - though it was his arms that had held her, his chest that felt the beat of her heart against his own.

She was alright; she’d made it. Everything else… they’d figure it out.

After a long night of worry. Pain. Anxiety. Weariness… it felt like a reward. One to cherish.

Before… he hadn’t expected to go so far. To experience so much. Was it too far, too much? Maybe. Though he’d only been trying to… he supposed it didn’t matter.

And yet… it cast the world in faded colours and made everything else feel, by comparison, dull. Because there was no comparison to it. The wholesome. The required. The frustrating. Too little and yet all he really needed rolled into one.

Standing in the lounge Oliver raked his fingers up over his scalp, keeping his hands splayed there. Shoulders and neck muscles that had only been relaxed just minutes ago were starting to vex again, starting to strain. His eyes remained closed as he inhaled and counted: a temporary relief to the fatigue piling high on his head. The room was quiet while the rest waited for him to speak.

But he wasn’t there, wasn’t with them – not yet. He was elsewhere, he was… away. Wanted to be away.

Wanted to be back there; in the kitchen. He’d never left.

I shouldn’t have touched her.

No. He shouldn’t have. Since now he knew what that felt like.

But he had.

And it revealed things impossible to forget, things he never could nor would regret. God. Why would I? They were things he’d secretly been waiting to feel for years but never had.

It had been… perfect.

He wouldn’t change it for anything else on the planet, could easily fall deep inside that memory and never leave, let it enfold around him as he breathed her deep, soaking her in –in a perfect world she’d absorb him, mould and shape him as she sees fit and he would let her do that; let her remake him in her colours… and he’d still be exactly the same, because Felicity already cherished him for who he was. He’d felt that it the way she’d practically melted into him, in how she trusted his movements, in how the world fell away when she touched him. In how she looked at him.

I didn’t know eyes could do that.

Could heal.

Her hand on his face, comforting him, like she found him worthy instead of lacking… he couldn’t not feel it, as if it was still placed there; a ghost of the memory still haunting his skin, revealing wants he should try to swallow. But wouldn’t. He’d be selfish… Just this once.

Please. Let me be.

He’d never had that before, had never felt that, the unfathomable affection that came from deep understanding and unconditional… love.
Yes, he knew what it was.

For all the things he might be, ignorant and unintuitive weren’t amongst his failings.

Felicity… loved him.

Eyes still closed, his mouth opened slightly at the revelation: it was astounding. Stunning. Like a balloon of pure happiness had expanded behind his rib cage, followed by pure panic: he felt like he couldn’t breathe.

She loved him.

He refused to assess the many other ways she could love him, ways he hadn’t considered – because what if he was wrong? What if she loved him because they were partners and trusted him because they fought night after night against the city’s shadows? What if she cared so much because she believed in him… but that was all?

No.

Something in him totally and completely rebelled against that.

He knew her.

Felicity… she wasn’t that forward with people. Not even with Dig.

No, he knew what he’d touched with her, what he’d felt coming from her back there and where, previously, he probably would have found some way to push such feelings away, maybe for weeks or months as he tried to see if they could live and love apart, to see if he could have what he wanted and do what he must at the same time… right now, they needed each other, for every reason thinkable. The good and the bad.

At least he knew, he certainly needed her.

She was the essence of stability and solace in a life so long without both. Right now it was what mattered most.

Oliver knew he loved easily; he found virtues and facets in women easy to adore and worship, easy to pursue when he felt he had none himself. But it wasn’t until the night past that he discovered he’d never been in love. Not in the truest sense of the words to be ‘in love’ with another person.

This thing they’d circled around for months – years – he’d felt. But he hadn’t seen. Hadn’t wanted to believe.

The things he loves get hurt.

It wasn’t even a lie: they had and did and would continue to do so.

The women in the room could attest to that.

And she’d almost died.

But the reality was in front of him. Alive. Breathing. Real.

A.

Brilliant.
His plan had been simply to stop her from leaving when she’d swung herself over the banister – so free, earnest, wilful and scared; he’d seen it, felt it, loved it – leaving him to try and follow.

He’d been stopped.

She couldn’t… She couldn’t leave him. Not then. Not when he hadn’t reassured himself that she was fine; not just alive, not just breathing but safe, free of pain and fear and smiling.

His plan… had been to be the first face she saw when she woke, so that she wouldn’t be afraid. So that he could reassure her. Could convince her. Offer her unmitigated proof and show her that he didn’t care about the Mirakuru.

He didn’t care that she was infected. It didn’t change anything.

It was nothing.

“Slade told Felicity he’d give us three days.” He started with, breaking the silence and opening his eyes. They were gritty. “To do what I’m not sure. But we do have an idea at least about who or what his targets might be.” By the time he’d finished he was facing the group again, hands by his sides.

When he’d been upstairs Sara had filled Laurel in about the infamous Slade Wilson and had since been only too keen to lend a hand. “What do we do?” She asked, again looking to him.

“We,” He stressed. “Do nothing. No Laurel,” he added when she opened her mouth. “Putting you in his crosshairs isn’t going to help anyone. The best thing you can do right now is-”

“What, hide?” She jeered, for the first time guessing thoughts perfectly. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

He took in a deep breath because this was going to be long. “This isn’t your fight Laurel.”

“He came to me.” She insisted, rising from her seat. “He came to my door and told me who you really are, who I’ve always known you are. A hero.” She took a step closer and though it was genuinely flattering to be told she’d always thought he could be heroic… it didn’t touch him.

“Don’t push me away now that I know.”

He shook his head, murmuring. “I never wanted you to know.”

The flutter of her lashes told him he’d hurt her and that she was hoping for something more. “Why?”

“Being in my orbit… it would have hurt you. Just as it would have hurt Thea. Or my mother, to be even a little involved in what I do for this city.”

“Ollie…” Her hand reached for his, trailing to his wrist. “You don’t have to hide this from me anymore. I can help you.”

How? “The only way you can help me is to be safe. To stay safe.” If he emphasised it enough would she get it?

“This is safe.” Laurel’s eyes looked directly into his. The hand on his arm gripped his in what she probably considered to be a show of solidarity but he just found it constricting. “It’s safe here.”
He got it.

He understood that because she’d never truly been part of his life – not for 7 years now – she didn’t really have any kind of basis to assume what she was saying was reality. She just… hoped it was true. But that wasn’t enough. It never had been. Being blind was no longer excuse enough.

“The kind of safe you’re referring to,” he shook his head, “you’ve never been with me, Laurel.”

That job had always been Tommy’s.

He’d spoken quietly so only Sara had heard. But he knew Dig – who knew him back – and figured he got the gist from his expression when the man turned to look elsewhere.

Laurel… she looked like he’d just smacked her across the face.

Her hand dropped from his and he briefly closed his eyes. *I’m sorry. I’m so sorry laurel.*

But when his eyes opened he found a furrow between hers and a new light in those hazel orbs. She’d taken another step towards him and he could only frown. “Ollie, I know you. I know you in your bones. You’re a far better man than people think you are.” For a brief moment she looked like she wanted to… her eyes flickered across his face. “I want to help you keep what you love safe. I can’t do that if you push me away.”

She was close enough to kiss.

*What was she doing?*

Push her away?

They’d have to be close for him to push her away. So how could he possibly…

“Ollie, please.”

Her plea, for what it was – because he knew Laurel well enough to know that she didn’t appeal to anyone but a jury – came out as a whisper. It felt too intimate for what they were. For where they were. She was inches from him.

He was taking a step back when Felicity entered the room.

He felt his insides plummet. *Don’t think what everyone else would think. Please. Be the exception.* She always was. It was unfair to ask, but for some reason it was vital that she know that this wasn’t what it looked like and he told her so. With his eyes, with his body – already a foot away from the woman he should have understood but never had – and with his silence, which screamed words only she could hear.

She’d been looking down at her phone when she’d popped in, head lifting, an honest smile in place – something had finally gone right – when she’d frozen. Just for a second. Had blinked softly, once. As she’d took in the scene. Slowly… her smile started to fade. *No.* She pressed her lips together before pulling on her bottom – the alluring action making his fingers twitch – before speaking, sounding unsure. “Is this a… thing I’m interrupting?”

‘*Totally interrupted a ‘thing’ didn’t I?*’

Hell no. “No.” He said, decisively; ignoring how Laurel just looked at him. “No, this is…” He breathed out. And smiled. At her. *Her* smile. It told her everything she needed to know. “It’s
Felicity’s face was the only face he’d ever come across in his life that could literally represent her very functioning heart. The goodness in it. And right now, she glowed. “Oh.”

Yeah.

“Caitlin?” He prodded.

He felt more than heard Laurel’s incredulous huff. At not being chosen. Again. He couldn’t blame her. But he also didn’t have the time - or the energy - to placate the two year lie singing in her head.

Thumbing through her messages, Felicity was already speaking. “…she’s been working 20 hour days trying to get it right and she thinks she’s finally done it.”

The excited smile on her face made him stare. “Done what?”

“The cure.” She repeated, fondness seeping through the smile she wore. “Caitlin’s putting the finishing touches on the Mirakuru cure as we speak.”

It was like a soundless bomb went off in his head.

In his peripheral Dig let out a deep sigh, a worry-free smile slipping free as his eyes closed. Thea, Laurel and his mother just looked confused but Sara – who had refused to look in Felicity’s direction – ducked her head suddenly. After taking a moment she glanced upwards at the group… and he was stunned to find tears there.

Then he remembered.

Rather than wait for a miracle cure – something she’d belittled at the time, made fun off, something she’d been absolutely certain wouldn’t pan out – Sara had decided to instead, execute Roy.

…and Felicity.

*Felicity was right.* Sara’s fear of Slade Wilson far surpassed his own.

And now guilt was the prevailing emotion in her.

What about himself?

He’d given Felicity the cure because… because it was Felicity.

The one who finds new paths inside of chaos, who paves the way for the ‘right move’, who finds answers to impossible questions. The one he 100% trusts. The one who, despite their large differences, agrees with his decisions to do different. To find other ways. Like with Roy. To save him, incapacitate him. Not out-rightly kill him. Even Diggle had had trouble digesting that one.

“It’s finished?” The question came out hushed, ‘*I can’t believe it*’ lacing the words.

Felicity nodded, smile wide and beaming.

His eyes closed. *Thank you.*

“What’s going on?” Of course Thea wouldn’t understand the significance of this, of why Diggle had just hugged Felicity like she’d told him there was a cure for cancer and he was a victim, or
why her brother’s head was bowed, shoulders slack…

“We can give it to Roy.” Sara said suddenly. Swiftly, her eyes hit Felicity who was stepping back from John. “And you.”

Oliver’s jaw clenched. “Sara…” Did she need to say that? Right now? In front of everyone? And he could see it in her eyes, the contrition… but she didn’t say a word.

Felicity blinked before swalloing. “Yeah.”

He gritted his teeth.

Too many faces where looking to him for understanding. Thea was the most explicable: Roy. Sending Sara a look – that’s enough – he turned to his sister. “Roy’s going to be fine. The drug that made him lash out? There’s now a cure.”

For the first time in months Oliver glimpsed the girl that first rushed him on the stairs on his return home. “He’s going to be alright?” She pushed herself up from the chair, staring at him with big eyes. “Roy’s going to be fine?”

He smiled at her, eyes flickering behind her when he glimpsed Felicity do the same.

They looked at each other for a moment before she winked at him, biting her lip.

He ducked his head.

“Yeah, he’s going to be fine.” He murmured.

Thea looked like the weight of the world had been lifted- right on the tail end of a match being lit under her butt. “When can I see him?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, blinked tiredness away and looked towards Felicity.

“That’s the problem.” She winced. “Tiny issue: I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, we’ll-”

“Felicity.”

“Caitlin said it’s going to be a couple of days before they have enough to distribute.” Came out in a rush of air.

A rush of understanding hit Dig’s face the same time it did his and Felicity’s. “And Slade gave us three.”

Felicity nodded. “Which gives us approximately 2 days and 16 hours, if he’s a literal kind of guy. I got the impression he was definitely a literal kind of-”

“So where does that leave us?” Laurel interjected, stepping forward, looking about the room.

Felicity’s mouth snapped shut. Her fingers fiddled with her phone.

Slowly, Oliver’s brow began to furrow.

There was something in Laurel’s expression, a defiance that wasn’t warranted here. Her arms were crossed and her jaw jutted out. “Sara told me: you need this cure to stop Mr Wilson, cure Roy Harper and…’ Frowning, her eyes flickered over to his Girl Wednesday. And Friday. Saturday… Everyday. “Felicity, right?”
It was as if something slipped beneath his skin and dragged its claws down the underside of his skull to the bridge of his nose, splitting away at his tenuous control. The thrumming of his pulse in his ears, all he could do was stare – nonplussed – at her audacity; his pupils all but exploding. A torrent of irritation rising causing the skin around his eyes to strain.

In all the time he’d known her, he didn’t think Laurel could be so insulting.

The woman had the most incredible memory- but only for the things she deemed important. It was irrational of him, he knew that: why would Felicity be on that list?

Because she’s important to me. And Laurel had just asked him to let her help him keep what and who he loves safe.

In less than two minutes she’d reneged on that silent promise.

It showed that in the end, Laurel would do exactly what Laurel wanted. As always.

And what Laurel wanted right now, was to be part of a world that had never housed her, that has no place for a Defence Attorney sit-in, turned vigilante hunter, turned drug addict, turned sudden believer… and no matter what he said he knew, he just knew, that – like with the earthquake in the Glades – she wouldn’t listen. Consequences be damned.

If he’d suffered any delusions as to why he’d never trusted her with his secret, there it suddenly was. An epitome made to hurt.

How were we ever in love with each other?

Oblivious to Oliver’s revelation Felicity nodded, an awkward smile filtering through. “Y-yeah.”

Laurel nodded, immediately moving to look at everyone. “So we need to figure out what Mr Wilson is going to do.”

“There is. No. ‘We’. Laurel.”

Genuine frustration painting the expression on his face he watched Laurel adopt her ‘he’s doing it again’ eye roll. If he’d been holding something – a pen, a phone –he’d have snapped it.

She was acting like they did this one hundred times a day. Like they would continue to do this forever. Like it was a game, already a part of their lives. Sure she took it seriously, but why was she trying so hard to force her own involvement and abruptly act as though his secret was hers?

It was the secret of 3 not 4. Or 5.

There was no Laurel and the Arrow. Just as – literally now – there was no Arrow and Sara. No Arrow and Roy Harper.

The Arrow?

The Arrow was made of three people: Dig, Felicity and himself. They were three cogs that made up a well-oiled machine. Without even a single cog the machine would malfunction. And there wasn’t any room for a wheel or a nut or a bolt.

“Laurel.” He reiterated, moving closer, letting her see that by no counts did he consider arguing an option… letting her see the Arrow. “This is why Slade told you. To get you involved.”
“Then let me get involved.”

His eyes narrowed. “And bow down to another one of his rules? I don’t think so.”

“Okay.” Jutting out her jaw – he could see the backlash being revved up already – she raised her hand in question. “Why would he want me involved in the first place?”

“‘Ollie and Laurel’. Always and forever.”

Oliver flinched, feeling something inside twist. As if pushed he took a step backwards as Laurel leaned away and towards her sister, asking questions with her gaze.

He took another step back. Away.

“On the island,” Sara began, eyes staring into nothing. “Ollie carried your picture. Never got rid of it. I knew then I’d always be second string.” She told Laurel, who looked done in, before glancing back to Oliver, wistful amusement echoing in her features. “I figured you told Slade about it, long before I saw you again.”

He had. But it was irrelevant.

Or at least he wanted it to be.

But hearing Sara now he realised that she was dead on target. The only reason Slade Wilson could possibly have for revealing his secret to Laurel – other than telling her simply because Oliver hadn’t – is ferret out whether she was still the focus of his affections.

And she wasn’t.

It was all just another can of worms that – by the melancholy expression on Laurel’s face – would only cause further difficulties. “You kept that picture?” She asked, eyes expressive.

A heavy sigh blew free from his chest: another secret he had to let go of. “Yes.”

“Ollie.” As if it was all she could say. “I… I had no idea-”

“That was a long time ago. It’s gone now.” It’s over. It’s done.

She seemed to settle, taking a deep breath and straightening her spine. Still… she looked down when she spoke, which wasn’t like her. “I know.”

I hope so.

“But it gives us an idea,” Sara interjected, “of where Slade will try to strike next.”

Something in that sentence seemed to irk Diggle. “Does it?” He moved from the peripheral into the centre and immediately the tone in the room shifted: Dig wasn’t a slight man. His presence alone commanded a certain authority, a level of awareness that this man could break heads with his bare hands, that he was a seasoned soldier and one of the few in the room that understood the true gravity of their situation. “Laurel isn’t the only person Oliver cares about.”

“That’s true.” Sara admitted, nodding. “But she’s also one of the few people tied deeply to his past, a person whose been targeted before because he’s the Arrow in the present. And maybe she’ll be in his future.”

There wasn’t a soul in the room who contested this.
At least not verbally.

He caught Dig as he came down with a serious case of side eye, an air of being deeply unimpressed with Laurel – who he’d never been 100% comfortable with anyway – with Sara – who, though he’d gotten along well with, didn’t trust as far as he could throw her – and the situation at hand in general.

Thea, surprisingly, was just frowning at the world. Throwing Sara a glance she gave Oliver a confused eyebrow raise. He understood the need. His mother didn’t do much of anything except watch Diggle. As if she found him deeply interesting. Which would have been disturbing – her former husband was dark skinned and authoritative – if he hadn’t remembered how safe Dig had made her feel. Something that made him so very glad his mother gave into paranoia almost 2 years previous when she hired Dig as his bodyguard.

Laurel actually seemed… a little overwhelmed. She wasn’t discrediting the idea. Nor was she agreeing. It was odd to see her so silent.

But it was Felicity he focused on like a shark.

She was just… waiting.

Waiting for the room’s inhabitants to come out of their self-aggrandised states with patient serenity. There was some small amount of concern agitating her frown line. A small bump he wanted, very much, to smooth free with a finger. Sucking in a lip she took in Sara’s stance, which was still curved in on itself – an oddly self-protective act for a woman who was a member of a league of assassins – and followed it to Laurel who was watching Dig now too, curious about the way he phrased his statement.

When her eyes finally fell on his, a soft as rain smile graced her lips. Small. Just for him. It asked if he was doing alright. If he was coping. If he needed anything. Told him that she was there for him.

He felt the impact like a hammer-throw because her eyes changed with it: they warmed, gentled, cuddled. Loved.

She stood there; strong and coping and smiling.

Infected with Mirakuru.

It was a mask. One made to soothe others… because she considered them to be more important. And he wondered how many times she’d worn it over the past few weeks.

For him.

He let himself look, stare. Just that. And felt a small, unintentional smile move his lips…

I love you.

It was just a thought.

But it was everything. The beginning and end of everything.

“Slade may be using everything he learned from when he was on Lian Yu with yours truly,” Diggle uttered, breaking through what felt like a bubble entrenching Oliver and Felicity alone. For a few seconds he’d forgotten where they were. The startled look on her face confirmed it, made him breathe deep and mentally shake it off. “But he’s been watching us. All of us. Learning our patterns, hitting Oliver where it hurts.” Dig moved closer to the centre, closer to Oliver. And
Felicity. “He and Isabel have already taken QC. And last night he tried to hurt them.” Looking at Sara he pointed to Thea and Moira, subdued and anxious on one of the many sofas. “His blood. Slade has his own pattern. When he’s not actively trying to generate Mirakuru, he’s plotting against family. Now that he’s failed… we can’t be sure who he’s going to come after next.”

“So we do nothing?” Laurel asked.

Dig frowned. “No. But I think making assumptions,” he stressed the word, “is definitely not the way to go about-”

“You’re my family too.” He couldn’t not say it, especially when it was so true. John blinked at him, at his words. Oliver let his eyes fall on Felicity. “…And you.” He took a moment more before continuing, searching Dig’s face, his brother. “If Slade’s coming after family in a couple of days, then you’re all targets.”

Dig sighed, but it was with relief that Oliver understood where he was coming from. It wasn’t just the people in his past that Slade could threaten, could hurt. It was Dig, it was Quentin, and it was Roy. It had already been Roy.

Felicity…

In his gut Oliver knew that this wasn’t over, that what Slade had done to Felicity wasn’t the end of it. He’d stabbed her… and had then left them alone. And then-

-You see in everything that we went through together on the island I never saw you look at Shado or Sara or even the picture of the lover you proved your infidelity with, the same way you looked at her tonight

She’s your hope

She’s the reason you try so hard to be better

BECAUSE I LOVE HER… AND YOU KNOW THAT

I’m in love with her

Yes

I know

…No, this wasn’t over.

The silence was strange again.

After such a filled morning being alone again felt odd. What was even stranger was that he didn’t want to be alone right now. But he didn’t have a choice: Diggle was catching some much needed sleep and so was his mother (after a large scotch, courtesy of Raisa) and Thea. Felicity was running reconnaissance – his underused laptop being secured that very moment – and would be back soon.
It was probably why he was currently looking at a breathless Sara. Alone.

“Got them.” Sara replied to the unasked question of why a rucksack was full across Sara’s shoulder. “He hasn’t touched her apartment.” Moving forwards she placed the bag full of Felicity’s clothes on the table near to where Oliver sat in the kitchen. “She has some beautiful things.”

“She’s a beautiful woman.” Was his immediate murmur as he nursed his coffee.

Sara blinked him. “That’s more giving than I thought you capable.”

His exhale was deep and his expression another question.

“It’s been a long time since I heard you describe any girl as pretty. Or lovely. Or beautiful.” She elaborated. “If you ever did.”

And there’s the rub.

Just a few hours before they’d been convalescing in the living room; trading words on what the third day would be like, thinking of the safest places to hide his mother and sister until Slade was gone, nibbling at the assortments Raisa had left them and finding that their appetites were tempered by the nausea of an attack when Sara had abruptly offered to pick up some supplies. For Felicity. Who would be staying in the mansion. Of course. There wasn’t any chance he was sleeping anywhere she wasn’t right now.

The offer had been taken as it given. But Oliver knew Sara needed some space. Now she was a free bird keeping her grounded would be all but impossible. And he’d never want to. But she wasn’t leaving to do a favour for a friend. She wasn’t walking out the front door to explore the freedom of her new single status. She was running. An instinct he understood all too well… but found it difficult to ignore or forgive in this instance.

Sara couldn’t handle having a friend, one as bright as Felicity, touched by something that terrified her, true.

The way she’d handled it, by making Felicity feel like… a freak?

He knew it was because of how Roy’s situation turned out but…

Honestly, it was humbling how foolish he’d been, *they’d* been.

And now he’d discovered another way in which he and Sara differed.

Evil, darkness, insidiousness, infection, blood, violence – it could all be poured like rain, could be thrown and forced on her, but at the end of the day Felicity would still be Felicity. Always. Because she never lost sight of who she was.

*Or who I am.*

She was stronger him. And she was stronger than Sara.

He believed in her. No question.

Sara… didn’t.

“It’s difficult to hide when it’s the truth.” He finally responded.

Sara’s expression became knowing. “Another odd thing coming from you.”
Lifting his eyes away from the table he spoke, we need to talk about this. Before Felicity comes back. “Why did you do that earlier?”

“Do what?”

So that’s how it’s going to be? There was no softness in his face, nor in the words he used as his expression became pointed. “You know what.”

She shuttered off, her face closing down. Right.

He waited, feeling the aches of the previous day echo through his body.

Then she looked at him again. “I don’t know how to… see Felicity and not be affected. Not see the Mirakuru.”

“Not good enough.” You treated a friend as you would an enemy. It still wasn’t justifiable. “She did nothing to provoke-”

“I know.” It was said quietly, her eyes flickering away. “But I don’t want her to turn into what Slade became. What Roy became.” ‘I couldn’t handle that’, were the words she left unsaid, words he heard anyway.

He shook his head, eyes filled with disbelief at the warrior before him; the one who, when push came to shove, would stand before him and an army. “You haven’t even given her chance.” And that wasn’t like her.

Something crossed over her face, too quick for him to name. “We didn’t know about the cure before.” She was too quiet.

“I tried to talk to you about that.” He sipped his coffee, still looking at her as she hid from him. “If you remember you weren’t exactly in the talking frame of mind.”

“I didn’t believe something so incredible could exist.”

“But you’d rather believe in the inevitability of death?”

Silence.

“…Death is reliable in its inevitability. Everybody dies.”

There was sorrow in her tone that may have, once, forced him up off his chair. To offer comfort. Some succour. A connection from someone who understood.

Except he didn’t. He didn’t understand. What she’d spoken was a universal truth but… She’d been with them, with him and Felicity and Diggle long enough that her existentialist view of the world should have changed, should have altered to allow for the possibility of… of a happy end. Of happiness in general. Of hope.

Only last night had he realised that he’d discovered he could. That he had changed.

Sara hadn’t. And wouldn’t. She wouldn’t simply disagree to it, a defensive mechanism he’d used once upon an earthquake ago, she’d believe it. Believe that sometimes people have to be bad to do good.

Oliver no longer accepted that.
His words were careful. A warning. “Are you saying the moment Felicity… was stabbed by Slade her fate was forfeit? Is that what you’re telling me Sara?”

There was a line from W. B. Yeats, something he read once in Russia that stuck with him:

‘I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly because you tread on my dreams.’

Tread carefully.

For you tread on my dreams.

“I refuse to acknowledge a world,” he whispered; his cup now empty, a warmth between his hands to focus on as his fingers curled with little spasms of anxiety at that very idea, “where Felicity Smoak doesn’t exist.”

It was like he’d struck a match. Sara whirled on in, eyes flashing as she gestured to the ceiling where Thea slept. “How about a world where Felicity Smoak kills the Queen Family in a Mirakuru rage.”

Off all the things he’d ever heard… He wanted to ridicule the idea but the time had long since passed where he could hurt the women in his life in such a way. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Am I?” It was there in her eyes, for all the world to see. The fear. The lack of hope. Cold practicality at its worst. Imploring him, Sara moved closer; the table was the only physical thing between them but emotionally there were blockades. “Remember Roy? Cognizant one minute, a killing machine the next.”

“I think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself.” Moving off the stool he felt like throwing his cup in the dishwasher but managed – barely – to place it carefully with the rest of the pots before turning back to her. Irritated. Incredulous. Hurt. It took him a moment to realise why he was feeling all these things, eyes narrowed and tired.

“Do you even hear yourself Ollie? We all saw what Roy became; it’s only a matter of time before she starts to change, to slip.”

“Don’t.”

“It’s true!”

He took a fast step towards the table, expression revealing every bit of his anger, disregarding her tiny flinch. “Have you even talked to her? Have you? Have you asked how she feels? If whether it’s as bad as we think it is?”

“It doesn’t matter Ollie!”

The darkness in his gaze deepened. “How she feels doesn’t matter?” He asked slowly.

He saw the words hit her. She backpedaled, shaking her head. “That’s not what I meant.” And yes, she looked pulled and pushed and frustrated at how he’d navigated her argument. “I care about her too Ollie. But none of that matters because she’ll be the same as all the others. She’ll get worse until she’s not there anymore.”

If a face could be black ice, if pain could be represented then Oliver’s entire countenance was the physical form of both. The skin between his eyes pinched, he didn’t say a word, didn’t do a thing. Except look like he’d been forced to swallow acid.
“She’ll hurt you.” Sara muttered. “And that’ll kill her.”

He shook his head. Once. Hard. “She won’t.”

The frustration in her eyes told him exactly what she thought of that statement. “How do you even—”

“It’s felicity.”

And you should know that.

Sara’s mouth snapped shut, opting to stare at him rather than argue.

He waited; his gaze hard. Unwavering.

When she finally opened her mouth, her words damned him… “You say her name like it’s a prayer.”

…And set him free.

Convulsively he swallowed, eyes closing.

“Well again…” She was gentle now, even though her words hit like punches. “You always did.”

I know.

He let out a shaky breath, eyes gradually opening. The emotion in them was very real and it made Sara step back.

…He didn’t deny it.

And he tried, he really did, to remember what they were like together – he and Sara… and found he couldn’t. The memory wasn’t there. Or maybe his ability to recall scents, touch, faces, and sounds was abolished by the haze over his eyes. By the sound of fingers dancing over keys on a keyboard, by the clip-clop of each heeled step, by the scent of coffee and sunshine, by the absence of expectations in a luminous gaze always filled with belief and care, by the warmth of skin meant for him to hold and worship…

Could he remember what it had been like with Laurel? With Helena? Or anyone…

Head tilted, Sara smiled; again, rueful, it wasn’t a happy smile. “Where you ever really with me?”

It was like the closing of a door.


Her mouse-like laugh, for Oliver hadn’t heard Sara laugh since before the island, loosened the knot in his shoulders. But not by much. “You could. You know… there’s a part of me that still clings to the idea of ‘Sara and Ollie’.”

And that hurt. It really did. Because time and time again Oliver had proven to himself that the past couldn’t be changed; only people could. Yet all Sara still saw when she was with him, with Oliver… was ‘Ollie’.

“And I think Laurel’s the same.” She muttered absently and it made him freeze, because what? Laurel still hopes…? She didn’t, couldn’t. Not now. Not after I have loved you for half my life but
I'm done running after you.

“I called her”. Sara stated suddenly. Swiftly. “Nyssa. She’s coming. And she won’t be alone.” She explained.

His thoughts took a 180 nose dive. “Excuse me?”

“We need all the help we can get.”

“So you thought the best help was the top member of a league of professional killers?” He shuddered at the thought. “Releasing an army of assassin’s on Starling City…”

“Ollie.” And it surprised him how calm she was, how quiet. “Sometimes to beat the unstoppable you have to do the unthinkable.”

Those words felt like an omen.

“Why does Laurel want in this fight?”

The sudden change in his argument left Sara fumbling, he could tell. Her mouth opened but her eyes chased for a sign from him. He gave her none. “I’m not sure. She found out who we both are… I think she just wants to be close again, to be involved.”

It was such an odd way to interpret the elder sibling’s mental state. “She was never involved.”

“And she hated it.” But Sara, who knew her sister better than he ever had or could went straight to route of the problem. “Never being chosen.”

And for a moment he remembered the innocent, bright eyed girl Laurel had once been, the girl he’d left behind on that harbour. I left her behind long before the harbour. Sara had asked if he’d ever really been with her. Looking back on it now, the same question could have been asked by Laurel because… had he been? He’d loved Laurel, but had he ever truly trusted her, before or after the shipwreck? Had he explained to her that he thought it had been too soon to settle down with her? No. It hadn’t simply been commitment phobia; he hadn’t been ready. It hadn’t felt right. And he’d always wondered if it had for her.

Had she pushed because she’d wanted a life with him, or had she been influenced and besotted by the idea of a future with him - by the efforts of her friends and his mother to move in the ‘right direction’? He used to wonder…

Now, it no longer mattered.

“Forcing others to choose you isn’t being chosen.” It sounded too much like a power struggle and that sounded… unhealthy. Even for Laurel.

By the look in Sara’s eyes she understood both sides. “Sometimes you have to take what you can get…”

“Okay so, I hacked in QI, which felt wrong in ways breaking into the NSA database never did, and it looks like Slade’s gone to ground. Maybe two arrows full of Viper Venom and a hail of bullets made him feel a little ill- oh.”

Still wearing his clothes Felicity stood at the entrance to the kitchen, his laptop under her arm with an unsure expression on her face.
He and Sara still stood toe-to-toe, the kitchen island still between them. The moment Felicity’s words signalled her entry into the room Sara’s eyes had flickered to her friend before turning away and moving for the door towards the lounge. By the time Felicity had finished Sara’s hand was brushing the handle.

“How on Laurel.” She muttered, which wasn’t exactly a lie. After their group discussion Laurel had refused to stay in the mansion stating that she wouldn’t be locked away on a mere possibility. As admirable as it seemed it was also more than a little idiotic. But then she’d reminded him that Slade had given them time. The chances of him grabbing her when she tried to exit her care was slim. “Be back later.”

“How?”

At the sound of Felicity’s voice Sara froze. He waited for her to show some other sign that Felicity existed… when several seconds went by and nothing happened he opened his mouth to speak when-

“I’m sorry.”

His eyes snapped to Felicity.

She was apologising.

“I’m sorry I make you uncomfortable now.” Biting down on her lip curl fell into her eyes when she took a further step in the room. “But you don’t need to leave on my account-”

“I’m not. I just…” He saw more than heard Sara take a deep breath, her shoulder’s rising and falling before she finally looked back. Her eyes were very clear. Very sorry. And very determined. “We need to get you cured.” Her words were pointed as she stared hard at Felicity and before he could snap a retort he wasn’t sure she deserved she finished. “Out of all of us it should never have been you.”

That he did agree with.

There was no smiling like he was used to between the two women, no soft embrace, no gentle words or soothing sounds… Sara simply opened the door and walked away.

And Felicity watched her go.

“Hey.” He didn’t like how she jumped, wasn’t happy that she just looked down at her feet, as if steeling herself for a verbal beating – or a hard day’s work. “Felicity.”

She turned to him, smiling. Eyes big and wide open to him.

Gaze tender, he spoke. “Come here.”

She blinked; brow quirking.

Lips upturning, he lifted a hand to her. A gesture.

He didn’t know why really, why he was asking, why he wanted… he just did.

Shuffling closer – and really, how this woman could be both adorable and sexy at the same time was beyond him – her face was a study in curiosity, only exacerbated when he took the laptop from her and gently placing it on the island beside them.
Just watching her, arms slack by his sides, her eyes went from him, to the laptop and back again. Then he did what he’d wanted to do since their previous moment in the kitchen.

Stepping towards her - and his movement must have sudden given how her eyes widened, mouth opening slightly - his hands reached for her shoulders, smoothing down her biceps to tug her closer until her chest reached his.

Her forehead met his clavicle and he sighed; a pressure he hadn’t realised existed lifting from his rib cage, allowing him to draw deep breaths.

“Oliver?” He hated that his name was a question, that she wouldn’t know, that her eyes would shine in wonder and enquiry rather than being settled in understanding.

But they were close too - so close - and when his nose almost brushed hers he swallowed. Her eyes followed the movement of his Adam’s apple, warmth radiating over his chest and he felt her fingers as they traced against his forearms, the sleeves of which he’d rolled up long ago.

Looking down at her pressed against him, his gut tightened.

He didn’t speak – didn’t know what to say – instead opting to act, needing to touch and feel. Like her breath on his jaw, the smell of her hair – wrapped in the scent of his tea tree shampoo – drifting to his nostrils, the feel of his sweater cased over her form... It’s not enough. Wrapping his arms around her, he instinctively moved his right under her left, so that her hand could lock over his shoulders as his left secured itself to her back. Cheek grazing hers he felt her shiver, the goose bumps rippling down the column of her throat when his stubble met her satin-smooth skin. Not nearly enough.

And it’s different from before, because it’s their fronts together instead of his to her back. Every breath from her pushes into his and every exhale from him presses down on her breasts. Her heartbeat is right there, beside his – her hips aligned with his hips, her thighs tight against his thighs, her lips tracing accidentally against his throat, his warmth cocooning her body inside his – and it feels like a dream, too good to be real. But it is, she is and he nearly asks her to accompany him upstairs so that he might keep the feeling in his sleep.

As an alternative he simply uses his thumb to trace her spine. Her inhale is shaky but she leans into his hand and he thinks maybe he found her happy place. The place she too can rest.

“I think we both needed this.” He whispers, his body ridiculously overcome with her. “Wanted to earlier but…”

But they were, are, at war with a war machine.

The arm over his shoulder tightens slightly before her hand moves to the back of his neck. “It’s okay.” Fingers moving they brush against his hairline before delving deeper. Digging into his scalp. Then releasing, massaging, stroking, her other hand flat against his lower back…

Stifling a moan that rumbled swift from his stomach - she had to have felt it - his eyes fluttered closed without telling them to.

Damn.

Touch.

It wasn’t something he’d received on a daily basis.
Before the island, touch had been a way of informing his brain and body of a change in environment, in emotion, in person... touch between him and women was a form of communication. Albeit back then he hadn't seen anything past it beyond the simple pleasures in life. Years later he could look back and realise that... Oliver, 'Ollie', had used sex as a means of communication. One of the reasons he was well known in the bed department was because of his instinctive grasp of what women told him through sounds and sighs, through touch and teases.

But touching simply to comfort, simply to give rather than take? It wasn’t something he’d known much of.

It wasn’t that he and Sara had never touched or cared for each other. However the words ‘bear minimal’ in public were a fitting description between them. They’d held hands, they’d kissed, they’d even touched to secure. But he’d never sought out Sara’s touch. And he had never, with Sara or any other woman he’d come to know the feel of, required the sensation of being loved through hands and fingers alone. Had never reacted so strongly to having fingers graze through his hair, a touch that asked for nothing in return but offered the world.

It was through Felicity’s touch that he realised she was trembling.

That her face was tucked deep into his neck allowing him to feel every shallow breath. That as much as his body had melted into hers, her body was allowing it.

It brought back the very real, very recent image of her staring into oblivion, at something he couldn’t see.

Tightening his hold he turned his cheek into her hair, murmuring into the tresses. “Where’d you go?” She felt absent in her slow response – the tiny fluctuation of her breaths, her tense shoulders – and was then clearing her throat.

“I don’t… I don’t know how to…” She attempted. “I don’t think I can say.”

“You can.” When she tried to pull away he shook his head. “No, Felicity; what is it? Tell me… please.”

He rarely said please to anybody. But in regards to Felicity it didn’t feel like a plea.

Her shoulders heaved with the weight of whatever she was feeling. Come on. “Tell me.” It wasn’t even a whisper, just a movement of his lips.

Her fingers clamped down and he stilled. Apprehension coiling until she eventually spoke.

“I... keep seeing Slade.”

He stilled. “What do you mean?”

“He looks younger and he isn’t wearing an eye patch.” Her head tilts as if she’s staring at said apparition as she speaks. “He’s like a shadow in my mind and it isn’t like he’s there to hurt me, he’s just… there. Whispering in my ear.”

Voice hoarse he speaks and there isn’t a doubt in his tone that he believed her. “What does he whisper?” And she settles as if she can feel it – that he believes and trusts her.

“Advice, mostly. He kind of showed me how to stop Sara’s Lance – I know, the pun was intended. He said it first.” It’s a mutter against his shoulder, as if she’s blaming said shadow. “He also said you’re a magnet for sensitive women with complicated issues.”
The words are choked when he responds. “Sounds like something he’d say.”

“He also said to expect a mess.”

“What?”

“Slade.” Her hand nudges at his neck. “He said that you couldn’t save the day without making a mess.”

If he’d had any doubts about whether what she was seeing was actually an illusion due to stress instead of a by-product of Mirakuru they were obliterated.

“Our first year on the island…” Lips suddenly dry he licked them. It didn’t help. “I told you about Fyers?” Some of it anyway…

She nodded.

“Well he tried to take down a plane; kill a lot of people, just to take done one man.”

“He killed someone you cared about, someone you respected.”

And the pain of that was still fresh – wearisome, the back of his eyes felt heavy with the people he’d known and lost over the years - to lose the man who instilled his first real taste and understanding of courage, bravery, loyalty, fortitude… the example he’d looked to, when he found he had none.

He swallowed. “Did Slade tell you that?”

“Yes. He says it was the start of what made Oliver Queen become the Arrow.”

Another surprise to find the truth in that so appealing… “I hope that’s true.”

“You’re so much more than what you let people see. What you let yourself see.”

It wasn’t true, it couldn’t be. He’d never, ever been someone’s personal hero, someone to aspire to and he wished, god did he wish that it was reality-

“You make me feel safe.”

Oh… he did, didn’t he? She’d said that earlier. And he hadn’t realised how much he’d needed to hear it until she’d uttered the words. But… “Do you feel safe right now?”

She took a breath. “I feel… scared.”

Her voice shook.

Everything came back all at once.

The muscles of his face, so relaxed with her, tightened – his jaw clenching, eyes aching - as everything inside him went quiet. A deathly silence. Felicity…

Again she shook her head, her touch telling him to not internalise this. “It’s fine, really. It’s just that Roy… he said the Mirakuru made him frustrated, that he’d shake with it. But I just feel afraid. All the time.” Voice so quiet, she’d leant forwards against the broadness of him. “Leaving a room, entering it, talking to people: it doesn’t go away.” Slowly, slyly, he rested against the table top with her in his arms and listened. It was all he could do. That and hate. Hate Slade Wilson. “No matter
what I do or where I go,” she continued, “I’m stronger now, I can feel it. Protecting myself isn’t an issue anymore.”

“It never was.”

He felt more than saw her smile. “I know. Took you long enough.” He huffed the tiniest chuckle before going quiet again.

“I can look after myself in a way that I never could before but… I’m also more afraid than I’ve ever been in my life.” She sounded so drained, even though her colour was more vibrant than ever, even though she’d slept; her control was tenuous at best. “I can’t win.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s difficult to explain…”

“Try me.” I’m listening.

And he was. Listening. She could feel it, the promise of zero judgement seeping from him and into her.

What’s the worst that could happen? I don’t know, I might sound like a tragic bunny boiler?

But she tried anyway, sheltered in his warmth. In Oliver’s warmth; how is this even my day? “For so long I was… a little envious, I suppose. Of Sara. Even Helena. McKenna, Laurel, Isabel, Shado, all the women you’ve been near or with, all of them were and are so strong. Sara’s Xena. All of them are badass. Yet now? When I’m finally able to do the things they can do, I feel like a child. I should feel powerful, should feel invincible. Like Slade does. Like Roy. But I just feel weak. Weaker than ever.”

On a daily basis she was presented with fabulous examples of the apex of her species. They were all incredible. She’d wondered about it; she couldn’t lie. She knew herself, knew who she was, had adapted to it and learned to cultivate her environment to attune exactly to who she is, but…

How did it feel?

Being them. Felicity knew that they had their own problems; she especially knew that appearances were deceiving, but she still hazarded a guess at the finery of their originality. Being effortlessly beautiful and wanted. Being desired and needed. Being… so inspiring. Being strong. Being necessary in another’s life, being the one sought for and not the one needed for the pursuing. Being the only one seen and heard instead of the one walked past.

Oliver was at the precipice of this framework of being. Not by his choice, not even fairly. Life had painted a path for him that had landed such a man with so many like-minded, wonderful, and truly terrifying women. He attracted them. And they attracted him.

Only a certain type of woman could make a man like Oliver Queen look twice.

Beautiful Creatures. Strong Amazons. Of which I am neither.
Exhibit A: Laurel Lance. The woman Oliver had openly loved and coveted for over a year after his return. A woman who made other women check themselves over when she looked at them. A woman who, without seemingly any effort whatsoever, had managed to keep Oliver’s eyes on her whenever she was near. A woman who could box a nose into a guy’s head with precision. A woman who held a law degree and could flaunt it. Her wardrobe fit the image of a model, *pretty sure those bras are from Elizabeth Secret.* With her very long, very slim legs, slender ankles and a figure to match – rich Brazil nut coloured hair – Laurel was the epitome of the kind of first edition exquisiteness that would and should be – *in this world dictated by stereotypes* – on the arm of a multi-billion dollar company heir like Oliver Queen.

Exhibit B: Sara Lance. Laurel Lance’s sister.

…Who was genuinely beautiful. She really was. And deadly; beyond strong. *Like an Amazon* – an assassin. *Indestructible.* With her strawberry blonde locks, her piercing baby blues that never quite concealed the sadness she held close there; she was a fantasy practically made to fit with The Arrow.

Exhibit C. *(And this is starting to get depressing):* Helena Bertinelli. Psychotic. Lethal. Another slayer in an arsenal of dangerous ex-girlfriends. Killer looks, *pun intended* – she was a stunner with raven hair – and, like Sara, she had a vulnerable side. A side that you could empathise with. *And,* like Laurel, she was smart and hard to get. Candy for men like Oliver. *Hell, if I was gay…*

Exhibit D… *(Maybe I should pause or something because this list is NOT EXHAUSTIVE, not by far)* McKenna Hall. A good woman, a good cop, who could have stood in for Miss America 2014; she too was gorgeous. Chocolate covered skin and pouty lips were a potent combination when uttering ‘freeze – put your weapons on the ground’. She was Oliver’s dream: a normal relationship.

Exhibit… E. Isabel. Rochev. The quick fling in Russia. And what happens in Russia stays in Russia, right?

*No… it doesn’t.*

Oliver.

Strength was a relative term. And she’d never been *that* kind of woman. To possess such forte with the looks to match. Sure, she was absolutely her own creature, had a will of iron and could easily win a war of the minds but in truth Felicity was a bottle blonde, bespectacled, IT girl who worked – *had worked* – at Queen Consolidated. Who had to wear heels because she was short in height. Who Sara thought was *cute.*

*Cute.*

*There’s a romance killer.* Decidedly not hot. Not stunning or gorgeous. *Cute.* Jesus. *No wonder he’d never really thought about it. There was never a chance, was there?*

But… knowing Oliver, having his trust, his friendship… it was enough.

She used to ask herself: *What wouldn’t I do… for the right guy?* For Oliver, there wasn’t a question of what she would do. She’d never kill for him and she would never use darkness to move him. It wasn’t in her nature. But now, when she was supposed to be strong – stronger than all those women – she was even more helpless than before.

She knew who she was and she knew that she didn’t need to be like the women she’d mentioned. But like she’d said… she’d wondered.
“Just when I think that maybe I can contribute more to this team than my mind, it becomes just the opposite-”

Little jerks of movement from him made her trail off and it took her a moment before she realised why she was frowning.

He was laughing. Silent laughter, but still laughter.

Er… “A girl could feel a little hurt being laughed at after opening up…” She muttered, almost absently to herself.

“No, w-wait.” He seemed to collect himself as he held her closer still and she felt his head drop to her shoulder. “Felicity.” He whispered, forehead rolling across her skin as he shook his head in amusement. “Felicity… Felicity.”

Okay, odd much… But she found herself smiling a little, even after her mildly embarrassing confession. “That’s my name Oliver Queen, don’t wear it out: I don’t want to buy a new one.”

A harsh breath hit her collarbone. “There has never been a single moment, Felicity Smoak, where I have looked at you and haven’t seen strength. It pours out like a faucet and you don’t even see it. Not all strength is physical skill.”

“I know…”

“I’m not sure you do.”

Pulling back – he didn’t let her ago, nor push her away – his hands fell to the valley of her spine, his left leg skinning her right as he settled against the table. It shouldn’t have felt so natural, so normal… but it did. He did. Her arms instinctively moved upwards; sliding up his chest and resting there, warmth emanating from skin that was both hard and soft. Velvet over steel.

There was a moment were his gaze seemed fathomless as he looked at her.

“I told you once… that you’re my partner. That I rely on you.” He licked his lips, brow furrowing. “What you don’t know is that I don’t even remember what it was like before you even joined the team, when it was just me and Dig. I’m sure he agrees. I know he agrees.” His eyes told the story. “We didn’t function, not really. Not until you came. You provided a stability I didn’t even realise was missing. It wasn’t just your intelligence, it was the alternatives you offered, the lack of judgement you showed me. You have no idea how hard it was to find someone back then who didn’t immediately judge me… and find me lacking.” When his fingers tapped her spine she jerked, startled in his hold and his lips twitched. “Anyone can fight; anyone can learn how. But there are few, if any, who can do what you can do.” Blue eyes traced every inch of her face. “You’re irreplaceable.”

She knew her mouth was open and her eyes were wide without glasses to shield her from his scrutiny… “Oh.”

“Yeah.” When did his voice get so soft… and when did her spine start reacting to it like a live-wire?

She gulped. “That’s what Dig said.”

“Dig’s usually right.”

“He is.” She agreed quietly, watching his face relax and soften. “Are you okay?”
From the way his eyes flicker and his brow slightly crinkles – it isn’t cute, it isn’t Felicity – she can tell she’s surprised him. “Yeah. I’m-”

“Don’t say fine!”

His mouth snapping shut, he blinked down at her with a very ‘schoolboy caught with his hand in the teachers draw’ look.

She swallowed a smile and missed the mark. “Oliver…”

That’s it, that’s all it takes.

Any part of him that wasn’t fully relaxed before completely unravels; his body lose and slumped, his breathing long and deep. “Tired.” He simply states.

“Sleep.” She simply replies.

His mouth turns up at the side and she can feel his thumbs stroke over her back. “Can’t.”

Why is this so adorable? “Why?” Her chin is on his chest and, yes, this really is more like something out of fiction than reality but it’s happening. Right now. And she’s basking. Reveling.

Shadows lurk in his gaze.

“Dreams.”

It hits her chest with the force of a punch. Suddenly it’s not cute anymore.

She gives him a moment to see what’s in her eyes. “Sleep.”

He frowns again, shaking his head-

“I’ll stay with you.” She interjected. Watch over you.

He blinks.

“…I don’t want to be by myself right now either.”

Any resistance he’d attempted to put up melted away, a sigh-like exhale leaving him… before nodding slowly. It’s a stunning conclusion to an otherwise insane 24 hours. “That would-” Clearing his throat, his eyes close. “That would be nice.”

Oh… really?

Okay.

So she does.

And it is.
On the third day it ends. And begins.

There’s no trumpet flare, no cannon… it just starts.

A war to fight gets fought.

Using the serum, Slade’s so-called soldiers are stopped. Roy is cured. But there’s no rejoicing. There’s no winning streak, no victorious cry to the sky… not at first. Not for Felicity…

Not immediately.

But then… later? It’s everything. For once. And why not?

Fingers tapping at speed across her pad Felicity let out a sigh of relief, smiling from where she sat. “They’ve been driven back for the blockade; we’re good to go!”

“Everybody in!” Diggle shouts, smacking the palm of his good hand on the roof of the black van they’d commandeered.

It had been the longest night in the history of nights. And it had actually started because of Laurel.

She’d come to them with information regarding Sebastian Blood and his complicity in the kidnapping and attempted murder of the Queen family. Blood had fled to the Glades had within hours had brought forth a near army of Mirakuru infected prison inmates and hardened Glades-men. After taking Laurel back to her father, Sara had joined forces with Nyssa, equipping her and her small ensemble (meaning three dozen intimidating League of Assassin members loyal to Nyssa) with the cure.

In the initial testing of said cure, Felicity had offered herself as test subject.

“Well, who else are we going to test?” She questioned Oliver – an Oliver who was showing her, very clearly, that the answer was a resounding no – who, wearing his green leather – and didn’t that just make Thea’s mouth shut faster than it had ever opened before when he’d stepped out of his bathroom at the mansion – had paused in his agitated pacing to meet her gaze dead on. “It makes sense.”

“No.” He shook his head and she almost – but not really – reached out to shake the obstinate man’s shoulders. “Not you. Find someone else.”

“There is no one else.”

He took a step closer. “What if it goes wrong?” His eyes looked between both of hers and though he appeared to be the collected vigilante most others saw, she heard the brittle tone to his voice. Like he might choke on the images in his head. “What then? Who will keep an eye on Slade? Who’ll be able to hack into QI’s security structure to see what he’s doing next or where he’ll go?” Standing barely two feet in front of her his hand rose to point at her chest. “What if you take it now, fall unconscious and I can’t… do anything about it? Just when we’re all about to head to the blockade?”

A slow blink from her had him sighing and she took a breath. “All excellent points.”

He nodded. Once. Relieved.

“But how are we going to know it works?”
Simple really. Give it to the already unconscious party.

Administering it to Roy, Oliver had forced his family to travel with Walter out of the City. Walter’s trust was never in question, but when he started to wonder, to fear, one word from Felicity was enough to make him leave with them. Thea had remained by Roy’s side the entire time except to hug her brother, before stepping on the plane.

Once less hurdle for Oliver to think about.

Hours later, with being so much more prepared – thank you Caitlin – Diggle, Sara, Oliver, Nyssa – her cronies – and Lyla who had insisted after persuading Waller to grant her some time, on being there with her guy, had taken down the majority of Slade’s critters. Not without injury of course. Diggle was suffering head trauma – but apparently not enough to stop him from driving, oh boy – Lyla had been hit in the thigh by a Mirakuru enhanced fist, Oliver was… decidedly Oliver-like. Handsome, brooding, ripped, tense and… satisfied. A little lighter even. At least that’s how he sounded over the coms…

Felicity wasn’t with them.

She was holed up at Oliver’s second hidey-hole, which he’d shown her just hours before.

_They’d been through this dance already; she was infected with Mirakuru with no apparent side effects as of yet – if you don’t consider seeing a fresher looking Slade a side effect – but it hadn’t changed his outlook. It hadn’t changed anything when he’d suddenly stopped her from grabbing a pistol to say, “Come with me,” before leading her to his motorcycle._

_And she’ll admit that ‘come with me if you want to live’ was very much a line singing in her skull. The Kyle Reese to her Sarah Conner._

_But when they’d gotten down there she’d know, instinctively why…and it wasn’t for the thrill ride the drive down had been. Let’s just say any part of Oliver between her thighs was a good time._

_Right now?_

_He wasn’t between her thighs, but he was close – almost ‘in her face’ close – and she could feel the warmth of his breath and smell the leather on his shoulders._

_There was a… resolute look in his gaze. It was deep, as intense as an ocean wave but controlled. Understood by its owner. And aimed at her._

_She didn’t understand and he could see it as he looked into her face, her eyes, begging her to listen. To trust. “Felicity, I need you to be safe.”_

_The furrow between her eyes quirked her brow. “But I don’t want to be safe. “She shook her head. “I want to be with you.” A few days ago she might have taken that back, might have corrected it but instead she simply stared back into that powerful pull he had over her and told him, with her eyes and her soul. “Unsafe. Together.”_

_Mouth slightly open he took her in, his head slightly titled. “Together.” He reiterated._

_She nodded, trying to smile and feeling like she was losing the battle. I don’t understand. “Yes.” Why was he doing this? Out of all of them she had nothing to fear, right?_

_For a moment he didn’t speak. Didn’t move. Just looked at her._
Then this… smile, soft and perfect, spread across his jaw; his eyes crushing her with their penetrating light.

He lifted a finger, a hand… pausing inches from her, a hesitation that spoke volumes on how vulnerable he must have felt. But they were ‘them’. Alone. A judgement free zone. A safe harbour to return to.

A shaky breath escaped him as one solitary finger – he’d taken off his gloves after entering this second lair – gently brushed across the blooming shell of her cheek. Tracing a path down his eyes followed the progression and she discovered – not for the first time – why blue was hotter than orange flame.

His eyes hit hers, dark and… devoted. Oh my god.

“Infected with Mirakuru, sitting behind a desk, walking in those ridiculously attractive stilettos,” her throat convulsed and his gaze shot to it, his finger trailing down the column of her throat, pausing before making slow circle inside the suprasternal notch – the visible dip between the neck and collarbone – and concentrating on that spot. It shouldn’t have but… she felt the touch in her vagina. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t have you near danger. Not ever.”

Speaking becomes so much more difficult when the man of your dreams is stroking your skin… “The world doesn’t work that way Oliver.”

Her voice was husky, low, and quiet and he, seemingly unconsciously, took a small step closer. “I know.”

He… he does? Then why…?

He slowly shook his head, still smiling sweetly at her even though his eyes murmured love and pleasure and other darker things. “Slade told Laurel that I was the Arrow because he wants me to suffer. He thought telling her my secret would make her hate me, that it would hurt me for her to know.”

“Right.” Felicity let out a breath. “Okay, but-”

“He wants to kill the woman I love.”

His fingers moved from her pulse point to cover her lips when she tried to speak.

She waited.

“But he knows now… I love someone else.”

Chest contracting, she knew her eyes had stuck on him, that she hadn’t blinked or breathed.

…Because his eyes – she was born to read those eyes, had discovered their secrets long ago – had told her everything she needed to know.

As if every inch of her caused him great happiness he took a minute to drink her in, his fingers slipping across her lips to mingle in with the hair in a ponytail and as they parted he moved closer in to feel her shallow exhale.

“I love you.”

Guttural, it came out truth. Fact. Real.
“And he will use that. But he won’t try to hurt me. He’ll just hurt you. He’ll aim for you. Mirakuru or not, it isn’t something I can chance.”

Feeling like she was in a trance she watched as he reached behind his back and pulled out a syringe filled with the serum.

“But that doesn’t mean he won’t go after Laurel. Felicity,” she really did love how he said her name; all breathy and emotional, “if that happens he’ll take her someplace away from the fighting, someplace near here.” The second base was only a block away from the harbor. “I told Laurel to get out of the city but she insisted on being with her father. If Slade does go after her, we’ll be spread too thin to do anything.” So close she could count his lashes his words were barely audible. “What I’m asking is a lot, too much, I know but—”

“It isn’t.” She whispered and quick as a flash he was with her, looking into her. “You’re trusting me. With everything.” It was everything, because she knew exactly what he was asking.

Not to save Laurel. Not to run away with her.

But to use the cure on Slade.

The day before Felicity had explained to Oliver that the memory of Slade Wilson hid inside her dreams. It was why she hadn’t slept since she’d woken changed. He’d hated it but once discussion of combat arose… he wondered. With her. They’d, once again, been on the same page.

She’d retained – not visual memory – muscle memory of how to use swords. And though she hated it…

Her nosed brushed his. “It’s the right choice—”

“It’s unthinkable.” No sound came from his lips but they formed the words. “That’s why I’m choosing this. Choosing you.”

Hand sliding to the back of her neck – his palm warm, as always – he pulled her into him, his forehead pressing into hers, eyes closing as a zing of connection flared through were they touched.

She wanted to laugh, giddy – like a school girl – at the situation. He wanted her to be safe but trusted her to do what had to be done.

She felt his hand close around her – now syringe filled – hand and tighten.

“Don’t hesitate.” He murmured.

“I won’t.”

He nodded, taking in a deep breath… then pulled his hand from under her hair, slowly trespassing over her ear until he cupped her cheek. They stood there for several minutes just… taking the moment.

The press of his lips – such a simple act that sacked her ability to think or breathe – stunned her. His face had moved slightly against hers – the thrill of his nose skating beside hers filling her with needy notions of beds, sunshine, coffee and him – but she’d never guessed he’d try to, want to…

So small and tender, she could feel the… the fear in it. How his mouth trembled as she pushed back, how his breath stuttered, how the hand against her face shook; but really is was a chaste motion. Emotion, not lust. Affection and heart, not libido and passion.
Fear…and hope.

No open mouths, not grasping hands, no tongue, no heat… just a long, sweet kiss – and it didn’t surprise her, that he could be sweet - that seemed to go on for hours. It was steadying and absolutely necessary.

When it finally ended she heard their lips part and the knowledge that Oliver had kissed her, that she’d kissed him back chased her senses like a wave.

He stared at her for a few moments more before his eyes shut tight-

Then he was gone. Hurrying up the steps and the closing the door.

“John, take a left.” She said, navigating her friend through the rubble that was becoming Starling downtown.

It hadn’t taken too long to set up the three laptops she’d positioned around her, linked to each person in the field; their coms active.

“We’re almost done here.”

“How’s Lyla doing?”

“She’s okay.” Dig let out a breath. “I don’t what you said to Oliver earlier but he’s been dynamite out there.”

“I-I didn’t-”

“You forget that I know you, Felicity. And I know Oliver.” He added. “The way he’s been looking at you… let’s just say a blind man wouldn’t have a difficult time seeing it.”

She wanted, terribly, to ask what ‘it’ was, but she was no fool.

Before any response could be made however, her phone beeped. “Dig, hang on.” She pressed to accept the call. “Detective Lance?”

“He took her.”

“He took who? What are you talking about?” But she already knew…

“Laurel.” It was a splinter in the mind, a hiss of worry. “That bastard took Laurel.”

Chapter End Notes

Okie dokie, one chapter to go!
There's so much more I could have done with this story but I have other stories I REALLY want to let loose. Better ones. And this was supposed to be a three part thing so...
Part 10

Chapter Notes

This one's for Eilowyn, who left an amazing review that I connected to on many levels but couldn't reply to - as goes with all the other reviews as well, oops - because my computer caught a virus and screwed everything up...
Okay, the real notes will be at the bottom but, yes. The long wait was because my original, final, chapter of this story was destroyed along with a chunk of a novel that I wanted to publish plus a few other things. Dare I say that I cried like a five year old when I am factually over 25? Well I do because I did. For weeks. No writing just tedious sadness.
Learned my lesson. Copies. Copies of copies. All the copies.
But I'm back now! And I'm having revenge. You see it was supposed to just end with one more chapter but after seeing 4x19 and Katie's Cassidy's audacious request to the writers to change past events (events of 2x01) so that she could leave the show having made some sort of an impact, well... I pulled out some scenes collecting mothballs in the back of my mind and decided to 100% flesh-out this story. These are just some of my thoughts made flesh. All I've done is express some truth.
I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 10

Breathing becomes a ‘thing’ that you suddenly notice when you’ve got to be as small and as quiet and as stealthy as humanly possible.

By Felicity’s standards, prior to her dose of the good-Japanese-stuff, her ‘quiet’ wasn’t so quiet. And her ‘stealthy’? Non-existent. Had never been developed in the first place. However, maybe now that she was Mirakuru enhanced it would - wait, what is-crap! My shoes are making all the noise!

You couldn’t be quiet if your life depended on it

She wished she could say his voice was like a cheese grater to the soul but honestly, right now she’d cling to the idea that she wasn’t completely alone in this. ‘This’ being the world of Mirakuru, the live version of Slade Wilson waiting within the warehouse and the fact that she was Laurel’s one true hope right now. Pursing her lips, she chewed on the inside of her cheek as her eyes flickered to her spectre.

“I’m trying to concentrate here.”

He didn’t exactly look impressed. He didn’t react at all. This Slade Wilson behaved more like a machine than a man and she’d recently come to the conclusion that he was more a remnant of the man Slade once was than the reality of the monster he becomes.

Stealth isn’t in your vocabulary

I know.
Just concentrate on getting inside – you’ll be fine – he isn’t thinking as clearly as he normally
would

It was creepy how he consistently referred to himself in the third person. Like a certain green
leather wearing vigilante I know. She shook herself. Concentrate.

But her brain was absolutely pulling her to pieces with each loud exhale, each squeak at some
unknown noise - a twig snapping, metal groaning - reaching her ears. Slade just had to go and pick
the largest, eeriest abandoned factory ever to exist in Starling – they have a surplus. Finally, she
reached the north corner wall; the Slade in her head had explained on the journey here that Slade
had already picked this spot, had already marked it as his little playing field, to snap the last of
Oliver’s restraints on his sanity. And the man knew each and every nook and cranny. But he didn’t
realise that others might too.

There was an open crawlspace along north corner wall that she’d been shimmying along, Mission-
Impossible style; man-made by way of heavy machinery.

She stared at it. “This is where the guy with the hockey mask sneaks up behind me, which makes
no sense since chainsaws are really loud,” bending low she made to move on her knees, “and tries
to kill you but can’t because you have Mirakuru swimming in your bloodstream but you’ll still
scream like you’re on fire…”

Yet she was no where near as scared as she would have been. Should have been.

Maybe it really was the affect of the Mirakuru. Maybe it was the presence of a younger, fresher,
kinder Slade – so unbelievably weird to wake up to ‘hey kid’ - Wilson silently haunting her every
step and uttering the occasional - mostly, sort of - word that helped more than it freaked. Maybe it
was-

I love you

Maybe it was that.

She stumbled, her extremities turning into warm jelly, oh… and landed on her butt in the gravel.

Putting it out of her mind hadn’t been an option. I mean… who could?

The mere memory of it made her body heat up, made her shudder. Her very natural reaction to just
his voice, to his words, his touch, his taste; she knew how he tasted now, god.

I love you

Don’t hesitate

I won’t

She tried to breathe normally.

We kissed.

So much for that. But she couldn’t help it. Remembering, the way they came together. Slow. Not a
blur of passionate haste but of tenderness; it felt… raw.

The type of kiss that was touch. That was voice. That was sensation and trust and hope and the
crushing inevitability of that hope. Because with hope comes the promise of a future and the
possibility of an end. He didn’t really need to tell her he loved her; he’d already said it in all the ways that mattered.

When he’d brought her to safety, he was saying it. When the safety was a smokescreen for how much he trusted her, it was spoken aloud. When he made sure she understood that he was relying solely on her to - save them all, to save him - he was giving her the power to destroy him.

Then he declared it with his lips on hers.

When he kissed her he was writing it, infusing it from the softness of him into the rushing blood under her skin. And when she pushed up against him, into him, she was saying it back. He’d breathed it in, had taken and understood without words that she was his.

But she hadn’t said it.

It was the type of kiss stolen; one enveloped in a resolve of steel and might and pure intention for ‘later’, for ‘tomorrow’; for they would always have to sacrifice the ‘right now’. And Felicity was good with ‘not right now’, never ‘right the hell now’ because they would always have ‘tonight, tomorrow and every sunrise after’. She could handle all that would come if he was standing at the precipice of her future.

In his green leather. In his grey suit. In his boxer shorts. Rolled up, beaten and thrown away, left to die; it didn’t matter.

He was hers… and she was his.

Hysteria bubbled up into the back of her throat. “How is this my life?” She whispered to no one.

And she couldn’t stop her mental re-run of the way he’d been with her. She’d expected so very different from what she’d received; a gentleness that shouldn’t have surprised her but did; something her brain had come to associate with everything Oliver was.

He is so much more than what the world sees.

The warrior he’d shown to no one, but who she saw every night he fought. The vigilante was known by all of Starling City’s residents as the Arrow. The venire of a cocky billionaire playboy or the selfish, lazy CEO.

But he was also a big brother, a son.

He was a selfless agent of morality and sacrifice.

And he was a dark proxy of chaos and violence. A man who felt that love and affection and relationships were weaknesses to avoid but pursued them regardless, as if he just couldn’t help himself. Still allowed such emotion to govern his every thought and action; to push him in unexpected directions, even down paths most wouldn’t dare poke with a stupid stick.

The way Oliver loves… it could be cruel in a sense. To represent itself as an act of protection that comes in toe with sacrifice. With pain. With violence. He protects by hurting himself, by pushing others away.

He wasn’t the Disney Prince with a body of steel that most women dreamed of.

Too bad for them she does.
He said he loves me.

Never in a million years… Oliver loves me.

And that was it. That was all. It was everything.

Honestly, Oliver telling me ‘I love you’ could be sold as little crystal formulas of pure sensational wonder because… because it was Oliver. And it made her braver than she’d ever been.

I was always his, wasn’t I?

But she hadn’t said it back. Does that make me awful? Is there something wrong with me? He was leaving; I should have said it back, right? Right?

No. Felicity knew exactly why she hadn’t said it.

He. Was. Leaving.

And when he comes back… he may think differently. Change his mind. Tell me once more that he can’t be with someone he really cares about.

He could also die.

Immediately, she felt like vomiting; everything within her vehemently rebelling. Not a chance; not on my watch.

It had been on the tip of her tongue, to reply. To say those three little words that had rang in her ear for more than a year. Being told I love you makes me lyrical, good to know. She still shook with the sheer honesty resonating from him to her through his words, his forehead touching hers, then the breath from his mouth… and wondered what he’d do and how he’d feel if, when, she spoke them back.

But she’d definitely had reasons for not saying them yet. Though, him trusting her with this enormous task of saving Laurel gave her hope that maybe, possibly, he could love without sacrificing said love. And the past few days hadn’t been easy in keeping her feelings to herself, especially with the stress of Slade and Mirakuru and incoming ninja warriors.

And there was the conversation she’d shared with Sara, though conversation wasn’t exactly the word she’d use to describe the dialogue…

“We’re not together, you know.”

Said the previous day, the words were quiet. Timid, even.

Looking up from her tool bench – arrow shaft in one hand, custom made arrowhead in the other – Felicity blinked. “Sorry?”

Sara shifted where she sat cross-legged on the second medical table, watching over Roy’s comatose form. Her wrist was lightly bandaged but otherwise in decent shape, yet Felicity still felt a shot of pure guilt whenever she saw it.

“Me and Ollie. We’re not together anymore.” Sara reiterated, simply looking at Felicity.

Waiting.

Said Girl Wednesday’s mouth open and closed like a fish before she finally processed what had
been said. “Oh.”

*Oh? That’s the best I can do? I think I fail as a person.*

True; it wasn’t her most loquacious moment. Not that she could really blame herself. Sara had been pretty absentee in regards to all things ‘Felicity’ for a good 24 hours until, surprisingly, on the dawn of the second day she’d agreed to stay with her whilst Felicity devised and attached the new arrowheads to their respective arrows. Each arrow could hold enough of the cure for one infected person, a cure they’d received in just a few hours.

And they’d discovered that there was a small army of them; several dozen Mirakuru enhanced escapee prisoner’s bust free from Iron heights.

Yet during this very serious work her brain had been more… agreeably engaged. She knew it really shouldn’t have been but… The past 12 hours had been like a dream. For her.

They’d fallen asleep together. Her and Oliver. As in; both of them in a bed: *together.*

She hadn’t planned it. Hadn’t even been tired at the time. She just hadn’t wanted to be by herself. Neither had Oliver and, knowing him the way she did, she knew he wouldn’t sleep unless made to.

But he had been tired; he’d told her so, which had surprised her. He’d pulled her – willingly – into the spare bedroom as far north east of the lounge he could get, which worried her. Then he’d shucked off his trousers, which had stunned her – he’d been wearing those amazingly body-conforming briefs that she’d borrowed but he carried them superbly better than she ever could because, *damn*, they were made for men to fill – and he hadn’t looked remotely chastised. Though he’d still worn an undershirt beneath that buttoned up collar. Standing close to her he’d unzipped the green hoodie she still wore, frying what little logic left that she possessed before shirking it somewhere – she swore it hit the lampshade – and looking her straight in the eye as he’d tugged on her fingers.

“Come on.” Sleepily, he’d nodded to her left. “Bed.” And, open mouthed, she’d been lightly tapped, more of ‘manoeuvred’, *I mean; what woman on which planet would need more incentive*, to land in a sprawl on the sheets. He’d joined her, pulling up the covers as he’d reached for her. *REACHED FOR HER.* How many times had she wondered and dreamed that he ever would or could; it was surreal.

He’d almost passed out the moment his head hit the pillow. The pillow being Felicity.

“Is this okay?” He’d murmured, his brain already shutting down, even as he drew on her side; his arm around her waist, bringing her to the middle of the bed before royally flopping. *Oof.*

*Is this okay? Seriously? What could she say? No? No I am supremely uncomfortable with your perfect body on top of mine?*

She’d nodded so fast her neck had cracked.

Suspended in disbelief, her chest heaving, she’d waited as he’d adjusted – her eyes wide at the ceiling - feeling the prickle of his jaw against the skin of her chest because her shirt was *that* thin. The reality of it was all was close to blinding.

Close to, but not actually.

Absently she’d thought that maybe there should be a manual for this kind of thing: ‘so you’re snuggling with Oliver Queen: next steps?’
But really, she didn’t need it. Or any help, being as supremely comfortable as she’d felt to be lying exactly how and where she was. And it was probably because of how strung out they both were but the feeling of floating, of wanting to smile and laugh and freely blush and hold him close as he sleeps – and be held back - was so strong within her…

Heart racing.

Warmth everywhere.

Feeling like a teenager once again.

*How did this even happen?*

It had felt like a miracle.

Snuggling down, he hadn’t let her go. The whole time, he hadn’t let her loose; too exhausted to care. And his deep breaths had soothed her into a lull-like stat, though she hadn’t slept. Memories that weren’t her own kept her lucid. Made her remain aware.

Hours later, when John had arrived with Big Belly Burger, she’d woken to the feel of a single finger, slowly tracing across her forehead and held perfectly still. Which was what had probably given her away. Eventually it had brushed the lock of hair lying there behind her ear… before reaching out to stroke around her earlobe. The finger had trailed to the skin between her cheekbone and hairline, touching every available area on the left side of her face before the warm caress – for that’s exactly what it was – had gone away.

Leaving her a trembling mess.

She’d been about to stir when his finger unexpectedly tapped her nose.

Like… *Boop.*

The laugh that had broken free couldn’t have been stopped as she turned towards the depression his body made on the mattress. Opening her bright eyes she’d found his own brilliant ones above her. “You knew I was awake.” She’d accused in a light whisper; the room about her dark with the evening hours.

With his chin leaning on his hand and an elbow planted beside her he’d nodded; his entire face a smile that hadn’t fully bloomed, like he’d been afraid of what would happen if it did but had been wondering about it all the same. Soft blinks punctuating each of his breaths he’d hummed. “Mm-hm.”


Devastating.

Touchable.

Gloriously rumpled – his hair ruffled and deliciously worthy of having her fingers run through it - in sweatpants and a t-shirt; probably more than he usually wore to bed but… *Oliver’s a gentleman.*

Didn’t mean she could help it; the amazing glow deep in her chest, making her speak words she shouldn’t really be uttering at all.

Yet, gazing, all she’d whispered was, “Wow.” If you could call ‘wow’ a word: a word that
covered… everything.

He’d stilled and she knew he knew that she’d meant him. It would take a blind man not to notice how her eyes – large and glittering with a hope she’d long kept silent - had been evaluating every little nook and cranny of his features, every single slope, curve and incline of his symmetrically perfect face. The dimples in the kind of soft smile a guy expressed when they are, at least in that moment, completely content to be there. The slightly longer than normal scruff across his jaw.

The way he’d taken in a deep breath, his expression strangely bare at her blatant exploration of all that was ‘him’. And finding nothing wanting or lacking. And making that obvious too. Before the smile had returned. His smile. Their smile. And when it did…

It was meant to destroy, that smile. The way his eyes changed with it. The way he’d made it so very different from all his other smiles. Meant to absolutely rend asunder. To take the heart and twist it. Shape it; change it to suit his own. And that was so unbelievably fine to her it should have been terrifying. In a way it was but the idea of the rewards, the simple pleasures that the possibility of ‘them’ could portend sort of nullified the sensation of her insides being turned to liquid.

The slow beats over the course of a minute had passed and she’d used the rise and fall of his deep breaths as a way to count the seconds. Just as he’d watched her. Through it all she’d wondered why it felt so comfortable. Then he’d lifted his hand again, his index finger moving to smooth another trail to follow back one day - soon - over her collarbone before his middle finger had joined it, like he hadn’t been able to help himself. A slow and steady stroke - a mark on her person - leaving her skin thrumming, her cheeks rosy and her breasts a heaving temptation that had made her glad for the duvet she’d been lying under.

Never had such an unassuming touch been so stimulating. But she hadn’t moved to assist, to join him or touch him too. Though she’d been dying to.

Instead she’d watched him watch her.

He’d watched the flush on her neck slowly spread, as if following the route of his touch. Explored her every reaction, as if they were worth the learning, worth devoting entire mornings to, as they’d lain there looking into each other’s faces and eyes and souls and hearts… until a knock at the door.

The look had remained. The whole day to the next day. Even after the war-speak and the Slade-speak and the ‘Laurel-Lance isn’t-listening-to-a-word-I-say-again-speak’…

She’d felt his eyes on her as she’d moved from room to room, had looked up occasionally to meet them with a deliberate lack of speed before blushing at the earnest affection there.

Spending hours deliberating on their next move, on where Slade might be as opposed to where he actually was, Felicity had volunteered to return to the Foundry to assemble weapons for the imminent arrival of ‘how many dozen assassins’ coming to town. Felicity was good with her hands – and yes; pun very much intended – as she’d said to Oliver before leaving, his face a picture of skilful curiosity.

In fact… he’d offered to accompany her.

Not guard, keep secure, or watch over her.

*Accompany.*

Like… escort.
Or take out. Alone. Together.

When he’d pulled out the keys to his Ducati her mouth had slowly opened into an awed smile, her eyes and ears following the jangle. Since when did they go around the city on his motorcycle? They never did. And she’d be lying if she said she’d never daydreamed about it.

Meeting his eyes – they were shining, brilliant, soft, asking her questions as if she held his universe in the palm of her small hands – he’d given her a tentative smile, the expression on his face telling her he’d considered her refusing... and hoped she wouldn’t. God, why would she? Never in a million years would she turn him down. He’d held out his hand for her own–

-Only for Sara to walk into the garage.

She’d felt her stomach plummet right there.

“Ollie, Laurel needs you for something.” Sara had stopped several metres from them, looking expectant. “She said it was important.”

*Ollie, Laurel needs you for something.*

Though she utterly hated to admit it, for a quick as a flash moment, one thought had blurred into existence in Felicity’s brain. *Laurel hadn’t needed Oliver for months. So why now?*

Because it wasn’t just *this* moment; earlier in the day Laurel had taken Oliver aside, prior to his much needed sleep to speak to him. Their conversation had gravitated towards the lounge where they’d talked for roughly 20 minutes. Then she’d texted him, requesting that they co-ordinate with her. Later, after Diggle had bought Big Belly, she’d dropped by again to simply state that she was making moves to put the political hurt on Sebastian Blood.

That, and she wanted to tell her father that Oliver was the Arrow.

The subsequent argument had gone on too long. By its end, Laurel had re-appeared, flustered and unapologetic, and Oliver… strained.

And right then? They’d been walking towards his bike, him looking back over his shoulder at Sara when, at her words, he’d just *stopped.*

Silence had reigned for too long a moment to be simply described as *considering* in nature. Staring at Sara, Oliver’s face had been… to describe it as impassive wouldn’t be pushing it. His face was stone. A stranger. And Sara…

Bold was probably the best evocative to use here.

Felicity finally listened to what her baser instinct had been telling her for last 24 hours: Oliver and Sara were no longer an item. Maybe they hadn’t been for a while.

But she didn’t say a word, choosing instead to look away with her lips pressed together.

Because Laurel needed him.

Maybe she always would.

But it was a stark reminder that Felicity had shared *zero* of Oliver’s past, had taken *zero* part in him becoming the man who fell in love with Laurel. Felicity wasn’t a fool; she didn’t want to have anything to do with the man who cheated on the woman he loves.
But… she’d missed so much. *Years* of his life that she’d never see…

Of how his smile had changed and grown, of how his laugh had deepened, of how much he loved and still loves his sister, of the carefree – shot of life – frat boy who actually *liked* boats and spending long afternoons sleeping in and watching movies. An Oliver Queen she’d never meet but one that Laurel knew intimately. She’d *had* that. She’d seen and basked in it.

In this area, Felicity was utterly beaten.

It had never been a competition; Felicity had Oliver’s trust, which meant so much more than the space Laurel and Oliver had given each other over the past nine months. Yet Felicity never thought she’d be even a little jealous of his past.

Just because he was now available… it didn’t’ mean a thing. It *especially* didn’t mean she could saunter off through cloud nine.

*Get a grip.* She’d felt the warmth of the moment fade in its entirety – Oliver and Sara in the middle of a staring contest, *more history I’ll never understand* - Felicity had swallowed her sigh and shifted and made to turn, stepping from the two of them-

Oliver’s head had whipped back to her.

*Whoa.*

The vulnerability there – the fact that he looked like he really, *really*, didn’t want her to leave – had made words tumble free. *It’s me; of course I’m going to speak.* “It’s okay; I can go alone.” She’d shrugged; smiling at him, for him. “I’m not exactly fragile right now.”

By his responding expression she figured that *that* was so not the point and that she hadn’t really understood why he’d asked to accompany her in the first place. *Oops.*

“That’s not-” A furrow had developed between his brows and he’d released a breath. He’d moved; his palm against her shoulder, eyes telling her *I’m going with you* making all the breath leave her lungs. “Laurel can wait.”

All thoughts had gone ‘squish’.

*Laurel… can wait?*

*Since when?*

No one *ever* left Laurel waiting.

But Oliver’s expression hadn’t been an example of frustration or boyish rebellion or even of a man desperately trying to avoid a subject he’d rather never touch, no. It had been simple.

He’d looked like a man who’d made a choice.

*Oh.*

Calm, serene, his hand had gravitated to Felicity’s upper back. “There are more important things right now.” He’d said to Sara as he made to leave, already turning away until-

“It concerns Sebastian Blood.”

He’d frozen.
“We’ve been down this road already.” He’d breathed, head slightly tilted and Felicity had felt more like an intruder than a girl about to joyride on the back of Oliver Queen’s beloved motorcycle.

Looking at his face, she’d heard Sara walk closer to them. “This is something you need to hear Ollie.”

On ‘Ollie’ he’d flinched; a tiny jerk she’d felt against her spine.

But still Sara pushed. “Ollie, I know Sebastian was your friend but—”

He’d turned on her then; the hand on Felicity’s back falling like the stone in the pit of her stomach. *Ow.*

“He *is* my friend.”

And he didn’t have many.

*Oliver.*

Completely no-nonsense, Sara had remained focused on him. “He’s also directly implicit in Slade’s plot to kill your family.”

And with that little revelation, the ride was off. Felicity waved goodbye to it, forlornly.

*Until* Sara had offered to go with her, *alone*, as a trade-off.

The look on Oliver’s face when she’d started to refuse – that pleading ‘*I’d die for you, please do this for me*’ expression that crushed her heart and killed her soul – had been the only reason she’d complied.

And now…

Mouth opening then closing, Felicity looked away from the woman, placing the arrow shaft next to the dozen others she’d completed. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Ollie’s in love with you.”

The simple frankness of the sentence had left Felicity mute. Deaf and dumb. Without sense or reason. It had her rib cage contracting, forced a pathetic gasp from her gullet, had her dropping the *fracking* arrowhead she’d been working on…

Because it just wasn’t… he wouldn’t. She wasn’t Laurel or Sara or…

But she remembered… how they’d been with each other… yes there was something there, something that could be amazing – the whisper in her head telling her it already was, that they were already right there – but… love? As in, romantic, head over heels, you’re the ‘only one that I want honey’ kind of love? The way she was already—

This needs to stop, she thought furiously, bending to snatch the arrow tip off the floor, *people can’t just go around thinking that Oliver—*

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Voice quiet, Sara sounded so sure, so understanding. A completely different person to the one who could barely look her way 12 hours before.

“What’s to believe?” Try as she might, Felicity couldn’t sound anywhere *close* to the calm control Oliver and Sara seemed to ooze daily. “Just because he’s available now doesn’t mean that—*”
“Oliver’s never been available.”

Thrown, Felicity straightened to frown at her.

Sara was smiling – *there it is* - the first real smile Felicity had received from her since… since before Roy lay comatose on the table. “Even when he *could* have been available. Even when he could have had everything he’d wanted,” Sara spoke so softly, sometimes looking at Felicity, engaging with her, sometimes down towards the floor in thought, “everything he thought that mattered. Laurel. Queen Consolidated. His mum’s pride in him. Everyone knowing the truth about him.” She smiled absently at the irony. “My dad’s respect. But… He was never really available. Up here.” Sara added at Felicity’s confusion, tapping her forehead. “Ollie has all the love in the world to give but… his brain gets in the way.”

The side of Felicity’s mouth turned up. “Hadn’t noticed.”

Sara shook her head, her eyes filled with humour. “He doesn’t make it easy.”


Sara took a deep breath and it was a long time before she replied. “It was worth it.” Of course it was. It was Oliver.

Felicity didn’t know what that meant. She hadn’t the privilege to know what being with Oliver meant. But it seemed every other woman she’d met in the past 2 years did and that was just… *perfect*. Laurel, Helena, Mckenna, Isabel – *gag me with a spoon* - Sally from accounting – I’d actually suggested he distract her with major flirting after she’d caught us both talking low and close about a heist and now deeply regret it since I had to listen to her crow for weeks about how *Oliver Queen ‘chose her’, how Oliver Queen made her come three times* – this ‘Shado’ from Lian Yu and now Sara.

*And this mental debate is super fun, fun, fun.*

*Concentrate on the task at hand,* “Good, I’m glad.” Nodding, her lips pressed together, she moved to return to her incredibly important task of making arrows to stop a small army of super strong criminals-

“*It was safe.***

Eyes snapping shut, Felicity breathed in deep. *Why are we even talking about this?* “Sara-”

“You know Ollie was my first love?” Sara chuckled lightly, even as Felicity’s newly strengthened heart began to beat so hard it felt like a fracture. She opened her eyes, breathing steady, and turned to listen. “Had a crush on him since I was fifteen, when I saw him downing shots and diving into a pool wearing the suit his mother had forced on him. He and Tommy were just laughing and… I was hooked. Then I grew up and it became more than that. Even though I knew that Ollie was commitment phobic I still thought it was worth it, I *still* loved him. I loved him the same time Laurel fell for him. Both sisters hooked on one guy we both knew would be hard work. Pathetic right?”

“Is it?” Felicity asked; her voice as soft as Sara’s.

Head tilted, Sara looked at her and shrugged. “We were dumb. We thought we could force him to love us.”
“You were also young.”

“I went behind my sister’s back and had an affair with him. It wasn’t just on the Queen’s Gambit; we,” her fingers came up in the classic apostrophe sign, ‘hooked up’ weeks before we left for China.” That was something else I also didn’t need to know. “But we both knew that Ollie wouldn’t love us back. He’s not made that way. Yet we still expected him to change for us.”

The disparity between the Ollie that Sara saw in her memories with the man Oliver Queen now was, was wide. It wasn’t right that she – and by extension Laurel – refused to see how much he’s changed.

“He isn’t the same person.” Felicity murmured with a frown.

“Yeah.” Something in Sara’s tone made her tense. It sounded like… bitterness.

It wasn’t something she’d really ever link to the Amazon Princess.

Sara shifted, hands dropping in her lap. “We didn’t see him. I don’t think any of the women he’s loved has ever really understood just exactly who he is. It’s why he isn’t ‘available’.”

If he isn’t available, Felicity wondered as her fingers fluttered for something to keep her from feeling Sara’s words, then why are you telling me he’s in love with me? If you think that he’s never been accessible then why dangle the carrot on a-

“Ollie could have been standing 3 feet from a woman, offering her his world to do with as she pleased, but inevitably he’d do something to make the whole thing self-destruct.” Without warning Sara slid off the table and began to stroll around past the bench to where the Arrow suit hung.

“Ollie has a pattern. He gives himself to women. Physically. He finds it so easy to love us.” Sara let out a long breath before breathing in another deeper one and Felicity went rigid.

Is this when she tells me I’m not enough? Not enough to get him to commit or… anything?

“I’ve never seen him give his heart through his eyes.”

…Huh?

“Never heard him speak so softly, with so much in each word. Never…” Her words just left her: Felicity practically felt them being sucked from Sara’s chest. But Felicity couldn’t properly focus because, what?

Head slightly bowed, Sara turned, glancing at her side on. “He knows you. Like, he knows you because he thinks it’s important and likes what he sees.”

“I-”

“And you know him. You know,” she gestured towards the green leather suit, “you know who he is and you like what you see too. And you don’t expect him to make commitments; you’re just there for him. Available.” The pretty bird’s eyes were calling words and emotions, trying to signify that this was important. “And you’ve made him available too… Just not to anyone else.”

And there it was; the crux. The fact that it was coming from Sara, from a woman who said she’d known what she was getting into, a woman who was in love with another woman while she attached herself to the past – to a man who no longer exists – so easily, told Felicity there were a few things that even Sara hadn’t let go of yet. In this respect, she was a mirror image of her sister.

And that was a stunning revelation.
Turning fully, Sara smiled again but it wasn’t a good smile. Wasn’t a ‘hey girl’. It was an ‘I can’t believe it’ smile, a ‘typical’ smile. Any good feelings, any warmth Felicity had gained from Sara’s early words evaporated, leaving behind a cold, stinging feeling.

It took her a minute to recognise the sensation for what it was.

“You know he looks for you when he enters a room.” Licking her lips, Sara laughed; it was an unpleasant sound. *Sara, please.* “I never even had him when we made love.”

*I really don’t need to hear this.* “Sara-”

Still smiling that cold as steel smirk, Sara lifted a finger in point. “Get it right; we screwed. We’ve never made love. Came close a few times, but that could have been because Ollie’s magic in the sack.” She tossed out, like a nail into wood.

That was it. *Screw it; I don’t WANT to hear any of this.* “You’re not-”

“But he makes you feel it, you know?” *No. I don’t.* “Makes you feel so loved and important… even someone like me can get addicted.”

Someone so broken. Someone so addicted to darkness.

Though not spoken, the words were screamed at Felicity. Forced on her. Pushed into her private space.

No everything inside her just… *hurt.* Like someone had shoved a fist down her wind pipe and pulled out her courage and hope, forcing a reality on her that she’d never been a part of-

Oh. She got it then, what she was feeling.

*It wasn’t fair.* It wasn’t fair of Sara. The *situation* wasn’t fair.

“Three days ago, me and Ollie slept together for the last time.”

All by themselves, Felicity’s hands curved into fists, her gut contracting. *Stop talking.* But Sara wasn’t done; she was in a world of her own, one filled with regret and disappointment. Completely blind to – or beyond caring - of the fact that she was hurting her so-called friend.

“It was… nice. Comfortable. We know each other that way, how our body’s work, what we like and what we don’t.”

A *burning* began to spread. Jealousy, fear and pain – an amalgamation of poison Felicity never normally allowed herself to feel – exacerbated by a person she thought cared about her.

Sara knew. She always had. She’d always known that Felicity’s feelings for Oliver were far beyond that of comrade, that of friend and ally. They’d mentioned it, brushed past the subject in whispers over tequila shots and muffins at breakfast time. So why was she deliberately using it against her? What was the point?

But it didn’t matter; it was making her see red; the kind of colour only *women* could see and interpret, could *use*. Being a Mirakuru machine, however, meant control was an issue. *Breathe, just breathe. She’ll stop. Soon she’ll-*

“The very first time we had sex, Ollie said your name.”

And with that, her whole world – one that had been on the precipice of drowning in emotions she
shouldn’t have had to explore – came to a halt.

*Ollie said you name.*

He’d been with another woman, intimate with another woman… and he’d said her name.

Mouth open, Felicity didn’t see anything in front of her, didn’t notice how Sara took a hesitant step closer, like she knew how she’d sounded. Didn’t see how Sara looked at her. Like she was seeing something too beautiful to touch. Like she was comparing herself to Felicity and inevitably falling to second place.

“In fact.” She heard Sara try for another shaky inhale but it didn’t fully compute. Nothing did right then, not really. Except a genuine kind of agony. It sat behind her eyes, clogged up her ears and made her heart thump harshly. “He said it a few times, always when he was…” Sara blinked, her eyes darting all over the place as if searching the right word. “Too overcome to hear himself. But I felt like… I felt like it was the only time he’d been truly honest with me. When he was saying your name.”

When he was bathed in pleasure. When he was overcome and exposed. He’d said… *Felicity.*

“He never stays with me, in those moments. He goes elsewhere. So he doesn’t hear himself.”

What… what was she supposed to say to that?

“I love Ollie.” Sara all but whispered. “But, as much as I wanted it to be different, he’s only ever been *in love* with Laurel.” There was a pause lasting only seconds but to Felicity, those seconds could have been hours. “But he’s never…” Sounding oddly low on oxygen, Sara sucked in a breath, shaking her head. “Felicity, he’s never looked at Laurel the way he looks at you. Not with even an ounce of the love, the trust, the belief-God, he actually believes in you! Do you know how much I would have loved for Oliver to believe in me? How much Laurel wished for that, wished that he’d trusted her? And you-you don’t have to do anything. You never had to ask for anything! You just—” Something in Sara’s visage just wilted. “…You just had to believe in him too. And you did, you really did. It shows.” Abruptly, she snorted. “He might as well have ‘property of Felicity Smoak’ tattooed across his forehead.”

Felicity’s stomach churned. *I’m not taking the credit for that. He’s worked so hard…*

“But it’s not like that at all between you two, is it? It’s honest. Real.”

*Finally,* Felicity’s eyes – a glittering pool of hurt, anger, love and empathy – met Sara’s, seeing the same well of emotion in the woman’s face. And waited.

Sara’s brow crinkled as she fought hard not to… to cry. The cry of an injured Canary. “Please forgive me for keeping him from you for so long.”

Blindsided, Felicity opened her mouth-

“I knew what I was doing that first time, when I went to find Oliver after Laurel first found out I was alive.” Sara continued. “I knew. But I did it anyway.”

She stared hard at Felicity and Felicity looked back.

Yes… that sounded… awful really. That she’d known how Felicity had felt about Oliver and had still… that she knew Laurel would hate it… that she’d heard Oliver say her name – it wasn’t even something Felicity could fathom right then and there – and hadn’t asked him about it, hadn’t
wondered, hadn’t done the right thing, hadn’t forced him to see what he was blind to, knowing that their relationship was truly far more superficial than Felicity had ever imagined it to be… Sara had been selfish.

Though it was a selfishness Felicity could understand, it wasn’t one she could agree with.

Not that Oliver was any less culpable in this than Sara. He just had the excuse of being completely unaware – since he’d deliberately closed himself off from the things he wants the most – of what he needed.

He didn’t need Sara. Wanted? Sure. He’d wanted Sara. Wanted something tangible for a change, wanted someone who understood his darkness, wanted something that lasted more than one night, wanted this something so much that he began a relationship with her less than 24 hours after she’d returned to Starling City.

Almost as if he’d been… avoiding something. Or burying something else. Too many something’s.

But it left her kind of horrified. Or at least searching for a handle to grasp. Her idea of a relationship, lasting or otherwise… it wasn’t this. It wasn’t… a seeping poison. Wasn’t a chess game, a competition or a long walk into self-doubt, it wasn’t a measuring stick for all your faults. It wasn’t a means of forgetting yourself or forgetting others.

To think of it; a lasting relationship between Oliver and… herself?

She couldn’t imagine it being anything other than a meeting of souls. A sharing of the mind. An honest exposure of the heart. A need for the other’s touch, a touch felt in the blood…

…A genuine desire to be near, to be held, to be craved and to be loved by the other. To be surrounded by that person as they take and give. As they grow and help you grow to. As they shelter and provide, just as they ask for comfort, for guidance. As they make you better, just as you make them so.

Was that too much to ask?

Was it too lofty goal for Felicity to want that… from Oliver?

“I just…”

It wasn’t exactly in Felicity to want to, or have to, listen to Sara any longer, but she agreed with her - that something very natural and truly honest was happening between herself and Oliver. Whether it ends well, only time can tell; just as something genuine was happening before her now. How could she not listen? How could she not give Sara the time of day?

For Sara, this was her last chance. To have some semblance of impact on Oliver’s life… because she knew she’d never had any at all. And seeing the absolutely devastated look on her face – by the sheer magnitude of the apology her eyes cried but her mouth hadn’t the talent to express – she was letting it all go.

The worst of it though?

Felicity had always been of a clear mind-set; she could see sometimes, so clearly, where others couldn’t. And being a woman, she could see how much both Sara and Laurel still sought to have an impact on ‘Ollie Queen’. Even if they were pulling away. Even if they were letting go. It was so sad. In a way, utterly heart-breaking.
Because…

“I wanted it.” Sara whispered.

Neither of them ever had.

“I wanted to be happy. With Ollie. In the way we were supposed to be.”

And never will.

“I was right in front of him and he saw me. We were in the right place at the right time. But there was never an us. I never…” Sara’s slack hand pressed against her chest. “I felt him in here.” She sucked in her lip, her eyes pleading with Felicity for something, anything; an anything that wasn’t in Felicity’s power to give. “But it didn’t go any deeper. I wanted it to.” So small and so quiet, her voice sounded more imploring than anything else. “It would have been perfect; that I’d gotten him, finally, after he was supposed to stay in love with Laurel - he would instead fall for me. But he didn’t… I didn’t. I don’t need him the way I wanted him to need me. And he doesn’t need me. Not even a little bit. I won’t be used to curb loneliness.” For a moment Sara just breathed, just looked beyond Felicity; those oddly innocent eyes so bright, they widened when she realised something. Huffed out another breath. “But that’s exactly what we did to each other, isn’t it? We just used each other.”

And there really was nothing Felicity could do to fight against that.

Didn’t mean she wouldn’t try.

“Sara,” her voice sounded hoarse even to her. Maybe that’s why Sara flinched. “You and Oliver were beautiful.”

“We were supposed to be special, Felicity.” Gaze suddenly hard, Sara nodded to herself, as if she needed Felicity to understand. “We were supposed to be it for each other. Even though I knew we never would be, I still hoped.” The shield dropped again, briefly. The woman was an interchangeable, impenetrable wall for her emotions and only she held the little red button. “I had to try, you know?”

Not trusting herself to speak again, Felicity nodded and tried to smile.

“We were supposed to be special.” Sara repeated. “But you and he… you’re magic. And you’re not even together yet.” The smile returned; the lovely ‘Sara Lance will always be there for you’ smile. It fell almost as fast as it appeared.

“If you lose control out there I will stop you.”

Felicity blinked. Talk about an abrupt tangent. “What are you talking about?”

In answer Sara’s eyes flickered down, to Felicity’s hands and back up again.

Looking down her eyes landed on… What? I…

Felicity’s hands were wrapped around the edge of the medical table Roy slept on. Her fingers had rendered to metal, twisting it completely out of shape. And she hadn’t even noticed. Mouth open, she felt a sinking sensation deep in her chest. My fingers left holes.

Eyes flickering back to Sara’s, they watched – hurt – as the woman’s face became a stranger.
“If the Mirakuru takes over you out there, I will put you down Felicity. I won’t hesitate.”

Felicity licked her lips. “You won’t even wait for the cure?”

“If it works.” Sara shrugged. “But Ollie won’t give it to you. Not straight away. He’ll wait until this is over. It works for him that you can survive a bullet whilst we’re fighting a war.”

There was no rancour in those words but Felicity felt the sting of them; that she’d never really managed to be the badass they all were.

*I will put you down Felicity.*

It made sense in a way, in her own ‘league of assassin’ kind of way. This was how Sara protected her ‘Ollie’. Her last act while she was still in the scope of his vision.

Felicity straightened, felling Sara’s stare as she walked back towards her desk of arrow-heads. “Then I need to make sure I don’t give you a reason. Are you going to help with this or are you just going to watch me play with sharp objects?”

27 seconds later Sara joined her.

“I expect ice cream and take out when this is all over.”

Stunned, she saw Sara stare at her in her peripheral before a bark of laughter left her…

Since that moment, Sara had appeared… a little better, a little freer. Felicity only wished she could say the same.

After all, she’d only mentioned ice cream for Sara’s benefit, not her own.

When they’d returned to the mansion, as cordial as can be, Felicity took great pains in staying as far away from Sara as she possibly could without being incredibly obvious about it. And it wasn’t through fear that she choose to, nor was it through anger – though she had every single reason to be angry – or bitterness…

It was because she didn’t want to be touched, to be afflicted or influenced in any way, by the raw negativity, regret and disappointment that seemed to pour from the Lance sisters like an open wound. Even from Laurel, who had been passing Felicity furtive looks every time she visited the mansion; Felicity stayed far away.

*Oh, Diggle definitely noticed, being Yoda and all.* But with his attention focused on their plans to disperse the cure - the where, when and how of it all - plus with his random moments of absence, *and by moments, I mean, 3 hours here, 4 there; like I wouldn’t notice right back about his rendezvous with a certain Argus agent,* she and he hadn’t really had time to huddle, so to speak. And Oliver-

*Ollie.*

She couldn’t tell him what Sara said to her.

*Ollie said your name.*

She didn’t know how. Didn’t want him confused in the coming hours, especially since he seemed so much more put together than he ever has.

It was like someone had shined a light on the man. After his sleep, looking so restored, it was
almost like seeing an Oliver Queen a year into the future. His bright eyes, the certainty, the willing effort to work as a team, the ability to extend a level of trust to a band of merry warriors like The League, and the very natural way he managed to end up in the same room as her each time she was forced to migrate from his side... they were all a dream. Something she’d wanted so long for him. That they were all finally seeing the man under the hood, a man none of them had ever seen but Felicity and Diggle had glimpsed and were now basking in his glow.

That he’d given her such a huge responsibility, where he would have once never trusted Laurel’s safety to anyone but himself - Felicity had been sure he’d give the pleasure of protecting a woman who insisted she didn’t need an ounce of it in the face of Mirakuru enhanced soldiers to Diggle – proved this. Proved he was... showing himself. Finding himself. And it was a man he could be proud of. One day.

A man who’d chosen.

"It’s unthinkable." No sound came from his lips but they formed the words. "That’s why I’m choosing this. Choosing you."

Hand sliding to the back of her neck – his palm warm, as always – he pulled her into him, his forehead pressing into hers, eyes closing as a zing of connection flared through were they touched.

She wanted to laugh, giddy – like a school girl – at the situation. He wanted her to be safe but trusted her to do what had to be done.

She felt his hand close around her – now syringe filled – hand and tighten.

"Don’t hesitate.” He murmured.

"I won’t.”

Looking into the tiny death-trap – the opening covered by a flimsy grate – Felicity took a deep, long breath. And nodded to herself. Laurel’s depending on me... and that is so not a thing I thought I’d ever think.

I wish you’d stop thinking it and get into the damn hole already

Rolling her eyes – Slade must have been this much of a peach to Oliver on Lain Yu – she dropped to her knees and started humming 80’s trash ballads that she didn’t know the words to. For luck.

__________________________________________________________________________

The solider – one of the many criminal escapees from iron Heights – smacked, hard, into the tarmac. A syringe attached to a plastic tube stuck out from the man’s chest.

Breathing low, Oliver tapped his com-piece. “That’s the last one. Area cleared.”

“Copy that.” Dig grunts as a hail of suddenly gunfire blasts over the channel. “Hold on a sec.”

He does. Standing there, encased in one of the exit tunnels leading out of the city, the urge to strip off the green leather is tempting. It’s hot, blood covered, sweat soaked work but after hours of
fighting... he'd finally cleared this sector of the city.

The rest was up to his friends; he trusted Dig to do the job...

Oliver had places to be.

Places he had to be, right now. Just because he'd left her... didn’t mean he wouldn’t follow. I’ll always follow.

Impatient, he spoke again. “Dig?”

There was a huff as the gunfire ceased. “Got it.” Whatever ‘it’ was. “What do you need Oliver?”

“Can you take it from here?”

Dig understood immediately. “You want to go after Felicity?”

Go after Felicity... like she’d run off, ran away from them. From him.

No.

No, he’d asked her to - begged her - to save Laurel. Laurel. Who wasn’t supposed to even be in this mess but who insisted that they keep her in loop. Who demanded acknowledgment from him, from his team, when she’d offered so little in return.

She’d told him she’d wanted to keep his loved ones safe. How do you do that if you put yourself in the line of fire? How do you be selfless – to act for another, for a friend – when your own self-interests are at heart. She’d been so dead-set on bringing the hammer of the Court of Law’s justice on Sebastian’s head, that all her claims to want to help any of them were rendered shallow...

...The Previous Night:

“Ollie; it’s the perfect time.” Laurel pushed. “With Slade’s men distracted, I can get to Sebastian-”

“And do what Laurel?” Exasperated, his face took on a pinched look – like he was dealing with an overload of ‘obnoxious’. “Follow him to his underground encampment; an area filled with Mirakuru soldiers who, may I remind you, were criminals long before Slade got to them?”

Straightening where she stood, the muscles on Laurel’s face were set firm. “No. I’ll infiltrate.”

“Infiltrate the building where he works, a building that might also be filled with hostiles?” He guessed, his tone deliberately patronising – he knew which of her buttons to push and vice versa; they’d always been good at that - trying as hard as he possibly could to get across to her just how ludicrous that sounded because...

She was a lawyer. Just a lawyer.

Yes; she was Laurel Lance, daughter of a detective, a woman who didn’t take anything from anybody, who never liked being told ‘the answer is no’... but a lawyer was all she’d ever be. She wasn’t a solider. And she wasn’t an assassin. She’d never created and destroyed entire networks, hadn’t left ‘impossible to penetrate security systems’ mute through subliminal coding. She didn’t know the Glades like the back of her hand, didn’t live like you had to fight for the right to do so. She hadn’t been forced into a fight, into a battle, into a war zone, like he had – for five solid years.

Maybe she had dreams, aspirations; maybe all this really was, was an attempt to accomplish something beyond being a recovering alcoholic. But, was she even thinking when she decided this?
Heading off, on a one-woman crusade, to rid the world of a powerful political figure armed with - yes - impressive evidence, but also on the crux of the evening Slade Wilson would declare war to confront a man – a murderer – who had an army of Mirakuru enhanced men, who wouldn’t care that she was a woman, in his back pocket and Slade Wilson in his front… and she thought she could, what? Arrest him singlehandedly?

And if she could, did she consider that to be proof enough that she was capable to do… what? To join him every night? Join the team.

Didn’t she realise all he was trying to do was keep her safe? He didn’t want to lose another friend and she seemed determined to make it a possibility.

“You can’t know that for sure!”

Actually, he could. “Laurel; I’m speaking from experience.”

“Experience can blind you.”

He felt like flinging his arms in the air. “So can pride.” He shot back, watching as the statement hit her like a slap to the face. Before she could respond he carried on, not giving her an inch before he took a mile. “You’re willing to risk it? Fine, let’s say you’re right and he’s the only person in the building. Then what? You arrest him? And he’s just going to let you?”

She pursed her lips. “He won’t have a choice.”

His head tilted. “Don’t be naive.”

“I’m not. I’ll make sure he doesn’t have a choice.”

A sound of disbelief left him. “So you’ll use force? I bet that’ll look good on the arrest sheet, in the newspapers: ‘Mayor arrested without warrant, beaten to a bloody pulp and read his rights by a woman not certified to give them; Laurel Lance, a lawyer, acting as a cop’.”

Never mind citizen’s arrest; Blood’s lawyers would have her cornered in seconds. They’d use her past and publically blow out of proportion each of her mistakes. He didn’t want that for her.

She stared at him, struck speechless by his audacity. True; he’d never really spoken to her like this before, but he had too much to deal with and he didn’t need Laurel’s stubborn-headedness or her reckless lack of awareness added to his list of growing concerns.

He gentled his voice. “You’re not your father Laurel.”

Her eyes flickered to the floor and he watched her take a deep breath – as if bracing herself - before looking at him and asking a question that temporarily stunned him into submission. “When are you going to start seeing me as an equal?”

…What?

Astonished, it was his turn to stare. How did it even make sense to her to go from where he was in the argument, to addressing their status as friends? Especially since it was evident that she considered them more than that; that maybe she actually thought they were comrades-in-arms…

Except – he would find – that the reality behind her words was actually much worse.

“Laurel, as a person, we are absolutely equal.” It wasn’t what she was looking for, he saw. She
scoffed, blinking away the prideful sheen in her gaze before folding her arms and looking away. Her safety zone. “But in the field?” He continued. “I’ll treat you as an equal when you’ve earned that right.”

Her head shot back to him so fast he figured she’d gotten whiplash. “And Felicity Smoak has earned that right?”

He blinked at the abrupt question. What did that have to do with... anything?

He pressed his lips together.

Feeling something in his chest start to tighten – desperately ignoring his instincts that told him he knew exactly why she’d brought Felicity into this argument - he took a step back, didn’t say a word, didn’t answer the question or give any indication that he was going to. Instead he waited; a furrow between his brows but otherwise he wore a passive expression.

She waited too... and it was odd because instead of seeing the stubborn resolve exposed in those hazel orbs he found a pleading gaze. He found...she was beseeching him. To do what? To explain? To actually explain to her what he wouldn’t even explain to Sara? A woman who he’d been sleeping with until a few days prior to this.

How do you explain the most sacred, secret and sensitive part of yourself to people you’ve placed 100% of your trust in? You don’t. You don’t even try.

Eyes walking the area he eventually came back to her. “What is it that you’re actually asking?” He queried, quietly. What was she really looking for?

Her next breath was... shaky.

“We’ve known each other a long time, right?”

If he wasn’t confused before, he definitely was now. Nodding, the furrow on the bridge of his nose became a heavy frown.

“Years Ollie.” She emphasised at him. “Since we were kids. And after, when we were dating.” Her mouth open then closed as she hesitated, licking her lips. “When we fell in love.” Her tone – a gentle murmur – and her eyes – soft and gleaming - asked him to remember that; to remember what it was like to be in love with Laurel Lance...

And he could. He really could remember.

He could remember her smile; a smile that had broken after Tommy’s death – a smile that she hadn’t used around him since before he left on the Queen’s Gambit. He could remember how her eyes lit up around him, in the way she giggled at his pathetic jokes – a laugh he felt she hadn’t used in years, because she certainly hadn’t laughed around him since he’d returned to Starling. He remembered well how she used to blush around him, how she used to wait on pins as he leant in to kiss her – their one night together after his return told him she’d become a biter, which wasn’t reciprocated, and that whatever they’d once had, had crumbled into lust’s easy embrace.

He remembered everything... and kind of wished he didn’t. It actually hurt. And it hurt more knowing that it hurt in the first place. That a major essence of his life he’d once considered to be the bright spot of his existence was now a source he only associated with pain. A time when he and Laurel were in love.

But he’d only fallen in love with Laurel after he thought he’d lost her. After he’d been stranded.
After he’d realised what an idiot he’d been. After knowing what being a cheat, a liar and a coward cost him.

*Laurel’s smile…*

He missed that smile. It used to be so easy to bring out in her too. Always cocky. Confident. So sure. When he was younger, it had been a turn on.

After his initial return she hadn’t smiled at him once; instead she’d offered justified rancour, something he deserved. But even months afterwards… no, he couldn’t really remember her smiling- not even during their night together. Truly and freely smiling at him. And he’d wanted her to because he’d felt its absence and didn’t know anything else, hadn’t experienced anything near the kind of love he’d felt for her.

In fact, the first time she’d smiled at him was after Tommy’s funeral… a time Oliver just… couldn’t. With anyone. Not even her. *Especially* not her.

What they used to be, the feelings they used to share…

It felt… acrimonious now. Old. Used. Tired. Tried. Neglected. And ultimately, over and done with. There had been no solace to find there; in both his memories from a simpler time and the memories of the past two years. He thought he could find the love he required in the arms of a woman who he knew would want little to do with him when he returned – and he was right to think so, even before ‘it should have been you’… he’d slept with his girlfriend’s sister; the same woman he was running to China from – but he’d learned much since then. About the type of love he wanted as opposed to the type of love he needed.

Still, he’d reached for Laurel those first nine months. Hoping, maybe, that they could heal their past selves with their love… but there was too much of everything else in there, too much for love to override. The love they’d shared wasn’t strong enough.

Maybe that was why he’d so easily slept with other women. Why he’d slept with Sally from accounting just 6 weeks after he took over as CEO. Why he’d slept with Isabel-

*Isabel.*

She’d been the coldest, most wanton sex he’d ever experienced with a woman. Quick too. They’d both been pent up, alone and searching for momentary respite. And he’d used it to distract her from his real purpose in Russia. She’d rode him hard – not really seeing him at all - and he’d *let* her, only seeing her as a means to get off – an available vagina with narrow hips. And nothing more.

In fact, it was barely memorable. Crappy sex. A quickie. An average fuck.

But it broke something he couldn’t fix afterwards.

Worth it?

No.

*I think you deserve better than her.*

She’d floored him with that. Rendered him utterly speechless and confused.

Even then she’d wanted the best for him… even when she was hurt, even after he’d told her through his actions, through his voice and expressions that he was unavailable as a potential
romantic partner and yet still rubbing – and it hadn’t been the first time – this so-called unavailable status in her face with every easy lay and screw, as if he was available to all but her…

And he was. Available to all women that weren’t her.

All other women were expendable. Breakable. He could lose them and he’d heal, change, adapt, and move forwards. It would hurt, but he’d survive their deaths.

‘All other women’ included Sara and Isabel and Helena… even Laurel.

With Felicity… it wasn’t possible, not with her.

So he thought she needed protecting. From himself.

Yet… the expression on Felicity’s face when she’d seen Isabel leave his hotel room with her dress left unbuttoned at the back, her shoes and stockings held by delicate fingers, a snarky comment thrown haughtily over her shoulder…

It made his heart drop to the pit of his stomach, feeling like the scum of the earth – and he had been, using what should be an intimate act as a distraction – as she’d turned away from him.

But he saw it – sex - as a means to an end, always. At the time, the idea that he deserved so much more than a quick fuck, was laughable. He didn’t. Hadn’t. But she’d thought, genuinely believed, that he did. And Felicity… she wouldn’t lie to him. She wasn’t the type to bullshit him, or the type to allow herself to be such a hopeless romantic that she’d say and do anything just to make him feel better.

She meant it.

And it was selfless – because it didn’t have to be her, she didn’t have to be the one who made him happy just as along as he was happy. He could feel it from her, was spellbound by it… it frightened him. He’d never met anyone that deserving of all the love the world can offer, but there she was. Is.

So, inevitably, he closed that box inside him; the one filled with dreams and possibilities that his heart and his brain told him would never come true but that his soul still craved-

“You once told me,” he blinked, Laurel’s voice breaking the spell and found that she’d stepped closer; not exactly within reach but… closer all the same. “That I was your future. That I knew you better than anyone else.” And she’d been holding onto that for a year; he could tell. The fragile smile she wore expressed that hope so obviously it hurt to see. “Isn’t it just another step forwards to trust me? To work with me. To work together instead of apart. Doesn’t that make sense?” Her voice lowered and his eyes followed as she took another step closer, a hand falling on his arm – like it had hours before when she’d told him ‘this is safe’, that being with him was safe – and she peered at him through her lashes. “We’ve stayed away from each other all year and it’s brought nothing but pain for us. Loneliness.” She shook her head - as if she thought they’d been fools - as whisper of a laugh echoing through her. “You even went to Sara, Ollie. Like in the past; when you were running from ‘us’, you went to her, repeating the same pattern. Over and over. And you only do that when you’re trying to stay away from this.” Her hand lifted, gesturing to herself before coming back to him. “I said I wanted a future with you and you ran. Then all I had to think about was the fact that Tommy died because I was in CNRI. I ran away too. I became an alcoholic. But I got better; now I’m sober. Isn’t it time we stopped running away from each other?”

I have loved you for half my life… but I’m done running after you.
Did she not remember?

She thought he’d been running away from a relationship with her after Tommy’s death?

Running away?

No… he’d just made a choice.

He’d told her that choice. In the letter he’d left her… that he’d needed to leave.

She’d been his saving grace; that such a waste could have such an amazing woman want to date him. And he’d told her that. He’d said she was the best part of him, of who he used to be. That he’d loved her and had decided to let her go. He’d made a decision. Because it wasn’t her that he needed after Tommy’s death. He hadn’t wanted or needed anyone after his best friend’s death. He’d just wanted to be alone. Not to start planning the future, not to start moving forwards when he’d already taken fifty steps back as Tommy died in his arms.

He knew she didn’t need him to live her life… and it was then that he’d discovered – when he’d left a second time for Lian Yu – that he and Laurel didn’t need to be close to each other. Didn’t really need each other at all. Not to breathe. Not to survive. Not to hope. It wasn’t the kind of burning love that tore at your insides and wormed its way inside you. It wasn’t a passionate, fervent love that created desire and the covetous natures that led to touch. It wasn’t death defying. It wasn’t soul rending. It didn’t whisper in the ears, didn’t make dreams better than reality…

It was just a form of love.

A painful truth. That it wasn’t special. He’d returned thinking that loving Laurel would be worth it, would be sanitizing. How awful to discover that it wasn’t even healing. How sad to remember it dripping with betrayal. Tommy…

Feeling the urge to speak he opened his mouth but she beat him to the punch, pressing closer until he could feel her against him. A jolt of something sparked through him; his heart clenching. “Isn’t it time we finally have what we want? Let’s choose Ollie.” Smiling at him, her eyes flickered to his lips. “Let’s choose to have each-”

-Again, he’d already chosen in this too.

His hand over her mouth stopped her before she could kiss him.

Eyes large, she blinked at him.

I don’t…

Heart thundering in his ears, he looked down at her and wondered where he’d gone wrong with… all of it. But he couldn’t find it in himself to sympathise; he was too galled.

Appalled.

His body fought the desire to just walk away from the empty study they’d decided to talk in.

“I told you,” he uttered slowly, “what you needed to hear. What I wanted to believe at the time.” That she and he were perfect, that they’d finally come together and were fate – game, set, match – instead of the truth. That they’d hooked up. One last time; for old times’ sake. To glory in what they used to be and maybe, just maybe, see if they could last. “And you took the words for what they were – you didn’t think for a second that maybe that’s all they were. You didn’t trust me the
whole time since my return but you trusted me then.” When I was telling you what you wanted to hear. In her apartment, the night everything changed, the night where he’d offered… nothing. All he’d told her was that he wanted to be with her – that he was ready and she’d flown into his arms. It had seemed so romantic at the time.

His voice remained low – disbelieving and angry - and her eyes fluttered but she refocused back on his face, a frown forming. “It was a lie, Laurel. You don’t know me. You never did. And I can’t say I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing you either.”

He saw it then: she’d completely pushed the letter out of her head. Their very own Dear John.

Slowly, so slowly, her eyes were widening as she started taking what he was saying for what it truly was. “If we’d known each other the way you wished we had,” the he’d regretted they hadn’t so many times, “we’d have done the right thing. We’d have broken up months before I stepped on board the Queen’s Gambit.” In fact, if they had… “And if we had,” He inhaled, “I may never have left in the first place.” Terrified by all the expectations surrounding him: school, work, relationship commitments. “And none of this – any of it – the Arrow, Slade, Tommy-” Choking off the name he paused, clearing his throat. His hand pushed further against her mouth when she tried to move to speak, clearly as affected by Tommy’s memory as he was. “None of it would have happened.” He whispered, staring down at her.

Finally, he moved his hand and she swallowed.

He smiled then; a small smile and it seemed to surprise her, to stun her. She liked it. “We may have had a chance, you know. We may have actually gotten back together; had that white picket fence and 2.3 kids.” She flinched at his mention of children but seemed to melt as he breathed the rest. “Tommy would be alive. I’d have control of my father’s company. My sister wouldn’t have a year’s worth of memories I wish she’d never had to endure and my father would be there, watching over me.” He shook his head, eyes flickering above her head, lost in visions of what could have been.

But Laurel wasn’t lost in dreams. “Ollie. We could still have that.” Like she was grasping at straws – and she was – Laurel’s hands landed on his arms and tightened. Like a noose. “You could still take control of your father’s company. We could still-”

“It’s my idea of a nightmare.”

As if she’d been electrically shocked, Laurel stilled.

“A prison.” He hashed out. “A four-by four cell. On one side would stand my parent’s never ending judgement about my life choices and how they’re just never good enough for them. On the other side, the responsibility to run a company I’d never had any intention of being part of prior to this year, an ever present reminder that my life was never my own. The wall in front of me would house you, Laurel.” Still he didn’t look at her. Didn’t need to; it was all crystal clear behind his eyes. “Wants, promises, expectations… always expectations.” He repeated, a breathy laugh of irony escaping him. “Constant expectations. At every side.”

The hands on his arms slipped off like she’d lost all control of them. Part of him was just as stunned as she that he was actually saying this, after all this time.

“And the last wall would be Tommy.” He closed his eyes. “If we’d have gotten back together, if we’d sorted ourselves out as much as we were able, you would never have known Tommy the way you had.”
And what a waste that would have been? For her to miss the chance at something real and devastating as being loved by Tommy Merlyn-

“-He gave us his blessing.”

Like the words had sparked something in him his eyes shot open. “He wanted you to be happy.” He threw at her and she had the decency to flinch. “That’s why he broke up with you. That’s why he pushed us away and that’s why we slept together.”

Because if Tommy hadn’t? Oliver would never have though ‘fuck it’. He would never have gone for it. Would never have gone to Laurel’s apartment whilst knowing that she and Tommy were together… but would she have gone for it too? Even if Tommy had begged for her back? Would she have wanted Oliver regardless?

Would she see it as settling if she’d picked Tommy?

“You said he wanted me to be happy.” She repeated, fighting for composure with her eyebrows raised – but not in arrogance – in an epiphany he didn’t share. God, laurel. Please don’t. “Being with you… and that night when you came over to my apartment, telling me you were ready. And making love… it made me really happy. One of my most treasured memories.” She smiled softly, sweetly; tears present in her gaze.

Treasured memories.

What he would have given to have her look at him like that just a little more than a year before.

Something like misery travelled through him and his features twisted with it. “Excuse me?”

It was… ridiculous.

And so. Fucking. Painful.

Like shards of agony he really didn’t want re-opening. If she was so in tune with him – like she obviously thought she was – why wasn’t she seeing the hurt she was dredging up? He was so sick of living inside pain.

His tone made her swallow; her shining eyes dimming and she took a step back like she’d understood – finally – that she’d crossed a line. “Laurel, I never made you happy.” He almost shouted the words at the sad girl before him. “You never smiled when you were with me. I never brought anything but pain into your life.” This time he did shout. “I slept with your sister, Laurel!” He stared hard at her, incredulous. “We slept together behind Tommy’s back! How do you consider that a precious memory?”

“It wasn’t like that! Why don’t you understand that?!” Vehement denial; always vehement. To the last. A splice of anger infected her features. “Tommy… he broke up with me. He pushed me away.” Yes, she sounded angry. At Oliver. For downplaying what they’d had together. “I tried so hard to make him take me back but he was adamant that you and I were meant to be together. And what if he was right Ollie? What if…”

He watched her lips move but the sound in his ears – the crushing waves – stopped him from hearing the rest.

He’d left her there.

The first and last time they’d had sex… He’d been exhausted.
He remembered feeling the weight of the mountain of lies and secrets unravelling regarding his mother and the Undertaking. How the breaking of his friendship with Tommy to ruins – the fear and disappointment he constantly received from him – had made him ache for simpler times. About how his sister, who had been improving socially but utterly failing academically, was not only dating a petty criminal but who was also feeling the effects of a brother and a mother who no longer spoke to her. He’d spent days at a time at the Foundry leading up to the Undertaking. And his mother had spent hours at Queen Consolidated, mourning the absence of her second husband. At the time the group cohesion with his team had begun to spiral to new heights; they were the only bright spot, so he inevitably spent random nights worrying about their safety. About how he was going to keep them safe as opposed to how they would all keep each other safe. A notion he understood a lot more about now and favoured.

So after sleeping with Laurel… oddly, trying to remember the finer details of that night was impossible. Since then stronger, lasting memories had taken their place. And betrayal had corrupted the rest. But he still remembered feeling the longing for her that he’d finally managed to sate. It had been as good as he’d remembered. Yet he’d hoped for better, he’d hoped for more.

Afterwards he’d lain there as she curled up happily against his side and he’d looked at her with a small hope. A simple hope that asked for nothing but peace. It was another thing he didn’t receive. Seconds later he’d fallen asleep too.

But then Diggle had called and he’d left her there, without a second thought. Hadn’t even occurred to him that she might upset by that, that she might worry about him falling back into old habits; he’d put the city before her. The first time he’d put something before her since his return.

After Malcolm abducted him, then he’d remembered. He’d even called her, asking only if they could talk later. Thinking about it, how it must have felt for her on waking – with him not next to her; a cold patch where he’d lain – he couldn’t understand how she could consider it a treasured memory. Wouldn’t distrust have marred it, with discontent muddling the waters?

Next he’d seen her was hours later. Hours. And they’d spent roughly five minutes in the hallway of the Queen mansion. Five minutes where he’d preened and pranced about half-truths; the whole thing dripping with wishful thinking. An outside observer might have cringed.

At the time it had felt very real, what he’d said. Now it felt like the worst lie.

Because he didn’t tell the most fundamental truth about whom he was, who he is, and what made him do the things he did and still does. He hadn’t been even a little honest with her.

He left her again when Tommy died…

How could she think it was a good memory? It was one of his most shameful.

Destroy it.

Destroy her belief in an ‘us’.

He wouldn’t even have to lie. Again. The truth would show her. Normally he’d be averse to doing so; to really letting her see the side of him she hadn’t seen when they were together – the side he fought so hard to keep from her – but… she wasn’t giving up. He could see it in her eyes. She believed, for some inexplicable reason, that they were destined. She may even believe that she could wait for him; allow him to sleep with all the women he chooses until he’s so tired of screwing around that he’d pick her?
And because she was so blinded to it – probably a consequence of processing so much in so little
time; that he was the Arrow, that her sister was the Canary, that a man she’d dated who was now
running for mayor was a psychopath – she didn’t see how insulting to her that was.

And how, where once that might have worked for 21 year old ‘Ollie’, it didn’t appeal at all to
Oliver.

“We’d been dating about four months.” He suddenly began, interrupting whatever flow of words
she’d been unravelling. “There was this week where we’d had a date every night. One each to
celebrate the story of how we met, how we grew, how me came together and for our future?
Remember?”

The hope that shined on her face – the hope he’d just put there – made him almost want to stop
talking. But he didn’t. She needed to see. And to move on. Even if by force.

“After 4 dates I was exhausted.” A flicker of unease swept through her, he saw it in the way her
brow puckered, in how her breaths turned shallower. “I wanted release.”

She frowned then. “Hadn’t we…”

“We’d slept together on each date, yes, but that isn’t what I meant.” Looking at her he felt the same
self-disgust well up inside him that he’d managed to cover over these past months. “Being in a
relationship? Being committed? At the time, it wasn’t right for me. Couldn’t take it.” Like a man
would. But he hadn’t been a man; he’d been a dumbass boy with his brain in his pants. “I needed to
release some of the stress, the tension, to be… bad.”

He uttered the word like it was a sickness. Sure. As if he’d understood back then what being bad
truly meant.

“So I went on a joyride. With two others. Two girls.”

Like a shattered mirror he watched the light in her eyes dim, saw the abrupt admiration she’d been
offering him the last 12 hours fall to pieces at his feet.

She hadn’t known about every affair that he’d had. About every sordid affair, every hook-up,
every orgy. Every mistake and physical stain he’d made on their relationship.

His next words came out harsh – partly because she needed to see just how not good he was for her
and partly because he was, again, disgusted with himself. “They had my pants off by the time we
got to the car and I drove to a hotel just in my shirt and boxers. By the time we arrived, one of the
girls had already given me a blowjob.” He was breathing hard, like it was soul-sucking to say. And
it was. “To this day I don’t remember their names. Or their faces.”

Laurel was just staring at him.

“And after that? There was some girl from some party at someone’s place,” which was how he
remembered the majority of his one-night, one-morning, one-day stands, “then there was Sandra…
then Max Fuller’s fiancé… and Sara.” The words continued to tumble out, like spores. “You
thought she was the only one? Did you think that the Queen’s Gambit was the only time we’d
hooked up? Laurel… I was a bastard. Who didn’t really understand what it meant to love, honour
and cherish. Who was terrified of the commitment you wanted. And you were oblivious.” And if
there was a slight accusation in his tone then so be it, because he’d always wondered how a woman
who was supposed to know him like the back of her hand could miss all his solicitations, all his…
deviances. His dalliances.
Could miss that he just hadn’t. Been. Ready.

Not to move in, not to make plans; none of it, any of it.

Focusing on her, his expression weary, guilty and wretched, he breathed again. “Is that… what you want?”

To be with a man like me who’s only that way when he’s with you?

It wasn’t like he liked remembering how he’d been. Honestly, if he could go back in time, go back to all those moments he’d…

No… no he wouldn’t change a thing. Not a goddamn thing.

“Then why did you come to me?” Her question, her tone, was flat. Quiet. But he could feel acid beneath it. He’d hurt her. Again… but she was still on target. “Why did you want to be with me? Why did you tell me at the hospital that you still love me?”

Feeling pain shoot to the bridge of his nose his voice took on a guttural rasp. “I never said I loved you. I said it wouldn’t be true to tell you that I didn’t.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The fact that you’ll never hear those words come from me?” Wasn’t that enough? “Not now, not ever. Not after everything I put you through.”

Chest expanding with a massive, Laurel blinked away tears. “That doesn’t mean you don’t love me.”

“Laurel…”

“Then why did you come to me after his funeral? And then again a few days later? We kissed.” It came out almost as a wail. His eyes closed. “You held my hand and I told you I was excited for the future and you-”

“Left. I left.”

She shuddered with a sob. “You ran.”

I wasn’t running, but… “What did you expect?”

Yes, that stunned her. “I beg your pardon?”

His head tilted slightly in wonder, eyes narrow. “Tommy had just died. After we betrayed him-”

There was something in her eyes that told him she’d at least thought about it, yet she still… “For the last time Ollie, we didn’t betray him!”

“But that’s how he saw it. That’s how I saw it. You even used it as an excuse to go after me – as the Arrow – for six months Laurel!” He spat the words. “You told your father; I heard you. The guilt you felt over being at CNRI the night of the quake… and the many times you reminded me that we’d lost him afterwards, about how much you missed him.” And how it was like a punch to his stomach each time.

Realising how hard he was breathing he took a step back, sending one harsh look her way before turning away to pace. To drag his hands down his face. Before he knew it he was mumbling though
his fingers.

“I went to you because you could understand why it hurt so much.”

“I did. I still do.”

“I know.” He stood there for a moment before he burst another of her bubbles. “It was comfort. Just comfort. But then you started talking about ‘you and me’… only days after losing a man we both loved, a man who felt less than loved because of us before he died. Before he was killed. By his own father.” His hands dropped but his head remained bowed. “The idea of starting a relationship with you… made me feel sick.”

He heard her gasp but didn’t turn. Just continued to twist the knife.

“We’d infected it. Both of us.” It was surprising how choked he felt – his tone certainly indicated tears – how close he felt to crying now. Buried hurts forcefully upheaved. And it was oddly cleansing. Words bubbling out that he hadn’t realised he’d needed to say. “Because we wanted so badly to remember how good it had once been. Because we wanted for something in our lives not to remain a disappointment. A mistake.”

“I didn’t see it that way.”

“Neither did I at the time.”

Looking back on it though?

He’d felt like that boy once again; the 21 year old who couldn’t keep it in his pants.

Couldn’t they have both controlled themselves? Because if they had… Tommy might still be alive.

“And that’s why you’re turning to Felicity Smoak? You’re secretary, Ollie?”


That’s all he heard from her now.

It was a button… she could not touch.

Felicity.

“Oh,” Slowly he turned back to her, his voice an anecdote on ‘lethality’. “You don’t want to go there Laurel.”

Don’t you dare.

There was evidence of tears on her cheeks but her defiance was strong enough to render those streaks mute. “So everything, all of the supposed growth, dating Sara – all of it! It was about falling back into old habits? Sleeping with your secretary?”

He just looked at her, impassive. “Executive assistant.”

“Oh my god.” She breathed; every word a bitter jab. “I’ve got to say that goes right up there with the billionaire playboy routine; old habits die hard.”

The way she went back and forth in her own argument – the way she stated that he was worthy, yet reminded him, repeatedly, that he was good for nothing at all…
“Hard to let go isn’t it?” He whispered. He knew, better than most how hard it could be to let go of the past.

And that was it. Finally. The push. Every last ounce of warmth she’d been offering was shuttered away behind hard eyes. Truth made corporeal.

He looked at her for a moment.

“I’ve never slept with Felicity Smoak.”

How the words burned.

Sleeping… with Felicity…

In dreams he pushed far down, in visions he’d allowed himself to wander through during board meetings at QC, in the dark when he was alone in the Foundry… he’d thought about it. Of course he had. It was inevitable. But never did it think it could actually happen.

Just the notion – that there was even a hint at a possibility - lit him up, feeling heat rise slowly from his toes to the north of his thighs before settling in his chest. Christ.

His fingers twitched.

She didn’t react but he could tell she didn’t believe a word. “I don’t have to justify myself to you but Felicity is a good person… she’s the best person.” He murmured; his head swimming suddenly in images of honest laughter, of ice cream Sundays and blond hair long enough to tickle his arms when he leant over her shoulder to stare at her monitors. “I’ve gone to sleep with her. But we haven’t made love.” At ‘made love’ Laurel’s face crumpled.

Because it would be that: him and Felicity… making love to each other.

“And let me tell you, going to sleep besides the one person on the planet – the only person – who has continuously believed in you, who makes you feel like you can be good – who makes you feel safe when you didn’t realise you needed to feel it - that you can be a hero, that you can have exactly what you want for a change, that you can touch the light rather than the darkness… it’s addictive.” He exhaled; it was, but it was also soothing. Honest. Warm. “It’s healing. And,” his eyes flickered back to Laurel’s. “I’m in love with her.”

It was first time he’d ever said the words to – about – a woman.

And Laurel looked completely dumbfounded.

“The next time I say those words, they’ll be to her, to her face. And only to her.” The first… and last person. God, he already knew. He knew. “Felicity… I need her, Laurel. I don’t just want her. Though I do, want her.” He spoke in segments, annoyed that the first time he’ll speak the words they’d be to Laurel and not Felicity but also relieved to get some of it off his chest. But not all of it. Not even close. The rest would be for Felicity’s ears alone. “And I never thought I could love like this. And be loved so completely in return.” Even though he had nothing to offer her… even though she asked for nothing from him.

Except for him to believe.

The silence that followed his words was so heavy he was surprised they both still standing.

She didn’t look at him. She simply stared out of the window, into the night. He couldn’t properly
see her face but he could guess – she was regaining her composure.

After a few minutes he heard her sigh.

“I’m sorry Laurel.” He uttered. Because he truly was.

They’d both wasted years of their lives for different reasons that inevitably hurt each other.

She shifted and quietly responded with. “So am I.” Before turning back to him, a little pale in the face but her arms were once more crossed over her chest. “But I’m going for Sebastian.”

All at once the agitation returned. “Laurel—”

“I am not leaving the city; it’s my home. And my father isn’t safe.”

“So you think you can keep him safe?”

“I think I’d rather be with him if something happens than to not know.”

And that wasn’t something he could fight her on.

Sensing she’d finally won something, she stepped closer once again. “I’ll stay with my dad. But when it’s time I’m going after Blood.”

He opened his mouth – almost snarling at her, because as much as a romantic relationship between them was a testament to insanity, he still considered her a friend he’d grown up with as a child. A woman who had changed him once. Had made him wish for love.

But before he could she spoke the sentence that ended his argument. “And if something goes wrong… I’ll know you’re out there. I know you’ll come for me.”

Present time...

He couldn’t coordinate a strike whilst worrying over Laurel’s safety. And he couldn’t just let her get killed. Not Laurel. He didn’t want to lose another link to his past, to any of the good memories buried there.

But the only person he 100% trusted on the planet was also the only person he 100% couldn’t lose.

It would kill him. In a way losing his mother or sister wouldn’t have done.

And yet he’d chanced it all – the lives of his family and friends, the City of Starling, Slade’s life – on Felicity’s Smoak.

There was no one else he could think of more capable of defeating Slade then she.

It would sound ridiculous to anyone else but himself. Even Dig would find the notion absurd. But Oliver understood that sometimes you have to do the unthinkable, risk the precious and be as unpredictable as possible to beat the unassailable.

Slade… even though she was on Mirakuru, he’d drop his guard; let himself continue under the belief that she was a scared IT girl.

But she wasn’t. God, she wasn’t. She was the smartest, strongest person he knew.

It had taken years for him to grasp the concept of true strength. The secrets of which weren’t held
within the shields men and woman project. It lay in the heart and Felicity’s heart was too strong to be corrupted by a psychopath with an eye-patch.

I love you

He’d said the words. He hadn’t meant to; they’d just… come out. And the whole of him eased as they did, as if his body had sighed, an air of ‘rightness’ settling about his person. He loved her. And he’d finally told her.

And then he’d kissed her.

That… he’d definitely meant to do.

He’d thought about doing so on their ride over to his secret secondary base of operations, with one hand on the bike and the other linked through the fingers wrapped around his waist from behind.

He’d thought about how she’d taste initially, about how her lips felt beneath his – if they were really as plump as they looked, as perfect and supple and moist as he’d seen them covered in pink and purple and red lipstick - then about how she’d react when he did. Would she fall into his arms, into his control? Would she melt? Would she stiffen then sigh? Would she kiss him back? … Would she reject his advance?

And suddenly it was easy for other thoughts to trespass, ones he’d never allowed himself to indulge. On how they could ride together again, after all this was over, only this time it would be… out of the city. Away. Elsewhere.

It had shocked him… because he hadn’t known that he’d wished to just go.

And it wasn’t even about a destination – he didn’t possess an urgent need to see Hawaii, he didn’t dream about sunsets in Tuscany…

It was just about her.

Just… about the two of them.

Leaving Starling. Together.

Forever.

It shocked him how that word slid so easily into his brain.

But that’s… all he needed really. He’d finally found it. The big ‘it’ that only a few people are lucky enough to find. How he was one of those people he didn’t understand. But he would make sure he spent forever and more thanking her. Loving her.

And of course the kiss was… everything. And more. They’d both given; there’d been no taking. He’d told her exactly what and how he thought about her through his lips and she’d pushed the same feelings back into him. He didn’t need her to tell him she loved him– he already knew she did.

Since then, since leaving her down there… the energy flowing through him – the adrenaline and the idea that it would all be over in a matter of hours – and the knowledge that he’d sent her into the lion’s den, the knowledge that he was in love, the knowledge that she reciprocated, the mere idea that he might have a shot at genuine happiness when all was said and done… it had turned him into a fighting machine.
A machine who didn’t need to kill to stop the unstoppable.

Staring out into the distance, where he could just see the docks – the factory, he replied to Dig.

“I need to.” Need to go after her.

“You won’t get an argument from me.” He really wouldn’t.

He hadn’t explained to Dig exactly what his plan was or that Felicity was the linchpin. All he knew was that Oliver had asked her to go save Laurel. And it wasn’t even about Laurel Lance at all. Still, not saying anything in the face of the disappointment John had thrown at him had hurt more than he’d expected.

“Go get our girl, man.”

A few minutes of twisting pipelines and dark corridors before turning a sharp corner and Felicity finally landed eyes on someone familiar:

Laurel.

She was cuffed to a large pipe hissing steam several feet above her head. Sweat glistened on her face where she stood, but she wasn’t fighting against the metal at her wrists like Felicity expected her to. Leaning slightly, so that her face and shoulders appeared briefly from the corner, Felicity saw why: a Mirakuru soldier stood a few metres away. His wasn’t facing Laurel – thankfully; she didn’t want to see another orange and black mask anytime soon - as if he didn’t find her the least bit dangerous – and she wasn’t, not to him. But, by the way the man kept shifting on the spot Felicity figured he was waiting for someone. Some signal.

And he’d get one. It just wouldn’t be the signal he was expecting.

Being a vessel of Mirakuru had its low points but one of the pros was that it had made her incredibly light footed. So it was embarrassingly easy for her to step up to the man from behind.

A sharp gasp from Laurel made him aware - I have been making a habit of appearing out of nowhere - but by then it was too late. Just as he’d begun to turn around, Felicity had already jammed a syringe filled with the cure into his bicep.

He went down in seconds.

That was… really fast. She felt a little sorry for him really; being taken down so easily by an IT nerd. Sucks to be you.

“Felicity?”

Laurel’s voice – stunned disbelief lining each syllable, like she just couldn’t believe what she’d seen – broke through her mental rambling. Felicity winced, grimacing - and here we go – before turning to the Lawyer.

“Hey.” She smiled, softly and stepped closer; checking on how tight the cuffs had been. “You
okay?"

The brunette bombshell nodded, blinking hard and fast. “I’m fine.”

_Good._ That was one worry put to bed. There was a thin red wring around Laurel’s wrist but other than that, she didn’t look hurt.

“Where’s Oliver?” Laurel prodded, breathing heavily despite the fact that she’d only been standing there. _She must have been so scared…_

“He’s co-ordinating the attack.” And doing a damn fine job. “Don’t move for a sec.” Pushing two fingers into the opening between cuff and wrist, Felicity pressed into the back of the ring of metal with her thumb. It snapped immediately in two. “Did I hurt you?”

Looking at Laurel, Felicity was reminded that the woman had very little experience with dealing with the bizarre situations that she, Oliver and Diggle got into on a weekly basis. Currently, she didn’t seem to be able to stop staring, open mouthed, at her wrist. Her eyes flickered to the broken manacle before she’d glanced back at Felicity.

Even though Mirakuru and its effects had been explained to her… yeah, it was still a shock to see small fingers break metal apart.

Then, in a blink of an eye – _I swear it was less than two seconds_ – Laurel regained her composure. Straightening, she dropped her hand. “Ollie sent you?”

There was nothing really in that question that should make Felicity worry. But the underlining tone – the very slight scepticism – made Felicity feel… uncomfortable for some reason. Like she was invading someone’s territory.

Laurel’s. And Oliver’s-

_I love you_

Right…

…She took in a deep breath, keeping her voice low and quiet. “He asked me to come get you.” Felicity replied, wincing when she realised how the words had sounded.

Like he’d sent her on an errand.

And in a way he had. Saving Laurel was only her secondary objective. Getting the cure to Slade was her primary. Finding Laurel so easily had been a simple act of chance. That and the ghostly figure of a younger Slade advising her where his older self might be situated helped too.

Laurel understood all this immediately. “He sent _you_?”

Felicity flinched. “Yes?” _Did I seriously just turn that into a question?_

“Of course he did.” Laurel nodded, but it took Felicity a moment to notice the derision on the woman’s face. “I mean, why would he come himself?”

“Laurel-”

“It’s fine.” Laurel uttered, flatly. “I told him I trusted him to be there and he made his thoughts on the subject _extremely_ clear.” The sentence told very little and a lot all at once.
Laurel had talked to Oliver the day before. But now Felicity knew what they might have discussed, what she might have said, and what she might have asked of him.

And he’d said ‘no’.

Oh.

_I trusted him to be there…_ Laurel trusted Oliver to always be there, to always _want_ to be there. But, he’d put the city before her. Just like he’d chosen Sara over Laurel. Just like he’d…

“Don’t hesitate.” He murmured.

“I won’t.”

Just like he’d chosen to trust _her_ above all else.

“Don’t make this personal, Laurel.”

The words just came out and Laurel frowned at her.

“What?”

“This isn’t about you.” Felicity stated. “Or _me_.” Watching as every muscle in laurel’s face tightened. “Or Oliver.” An echo of shame flickered through the woman and Felicity felt a pang of sympathy. *Empathy._ “It’s about the people of Starling. It’s about saving our home. And it’s about stopping Slade.”

For a sum total of 13 seconds – she knew because Spectre Slade counted in a monotone after stating that 3 seconds was 10 seconds too long - Laurel just looked at her.

“So I need to get you out of here.” Felicity abruptly shot out, though _quietly._ “Slade is hiding somewhere and-”

“No, I want to stay.” Laurel insisted. “I can help.”

Eyes flickering left and right, Felicity asked, “How?”

For a moment - Felicity figured it was a first for her - Laurel appeared lost for words. “I… I can’t just leave…”

“Sure you can.”

“You want me to let you confront him _alone_?”

“Ssh!” Because _loud._ She licked her lips, glancing about them. “That was… kind of the idea actually.”

Laurel crossed her arms, leaning on one leg. “Well, what can _you_ do against him?”

The look Felicity gave her could only be described as _‘please, dumbass, really?’_

And normally… yes, there was now way she’d normally be so condescending, especially not to the all mighty Laurel Lance but this _really_ wasn’t the time for Laurel to be stepping on her toes. Plus, Felicity was terrified. She had to cure _Slade Wilson_, meaning she had to confront him. That she had Mirakuru didn’t dull that fear a bit so whatever Laurel thought, well, it could keep.
And what Laurel thought was written in bold across her face: she looked like she’d swallowed lemons.

Felicity arched a brow.

“Mirakuru?” Laurel gritted out.

Felicity nodded. “Yep.”

Lips pursed, Laurel took a deep breath through her nose. “Fine. Where am I supposed to go?”

“You need to get to your father. Keep each other safe.” Pivoting, Felicity gestured for Laurel to follow her as she stalked back the way she came. “I can lead you back out – the hole is super tiny BTW,” Laurel’s confusion did nothing to deter her, “but once you’re out-”

“She’s not going anywhere.”

Stiffening, Felicity stopped cold.

To her right, an opening led out into an open area of the factory. Standing there… was Isabel.

Decked to the nines in a really intimidating leather combatant suit – orange is the new black - she stepped closer. “And neither are you.” As Felicity just stared at her both of Isabel’s hands reached behind her. Slowly, she pulled out two swords – the scrape of steel a shiver on Felicity’s spine – knowing full well Felicity stood weapon-less. By the smirk on her face, she couldn’t care less. Preferred her prey terrorised. Powerless.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this Miss Smoak.” With every word something savage inside of Isabel seemed to increase.

Felicity blinked. Momentarily side tracked form the sight of Isabel’s swords because – sharp. “Er, why?”

The smirk quivered under suppressed rage. “You. Ruined. Everything.” Eyes flashing, they slid to Laurel. “For you too I bet. She just swans in and all of a sudden she’s all he can see.”

Okay, colour me confused.

Feeling Laurel shift in her peripheral, Felicity tried to prod her into staying behind her but-

“Ever since the day Oliver said your name, I’ve wanted to wipe that haughty little smile right off that pretty face of yours.” Isabel snarled… and for the first time Felicity thought the reputed beauty looked supremely horrible- wait, what did she say? “Or take a limb.” She pointed a sword at her leg. “Or two.” Then her arm.

But Felicity wasn’t focused on that.

Ever since the day Oliver said your name

Ollie said your name

No… It couldn’t be the same… there were months between them; he couldn’t have. Not then. Not in Russia.

God, Russia. How she hated Russia. She always remembered it as the day Oliver became Ollie again, lost leave of his senses and slept with the enemy.
And apparently it had meant nothing.

How could sex mean nothing? It was a concept she couldn’t understand, didn’t want to understand. It sounded so cold. They’d just used each other… *I mean, does that really make men and women feel good about themselves?*

But now that she had a clearer view of who Oliver really was at heart… she remembered it with sadness, which wasn’t much better but still…

He’d been lonely. And he hadn’t thought he’d deserved anything more than an emotionless roll in the hay.

“He said her name? That’s an odd reason to be angry at someone.”

Felicity closed her eyes. *Laurel.* She was probably trying to inject some sense into a situation that probably seemed senseless to her. But it was so not a-

“Oh… I forgot, you don’t know. Do you?” Said so slowly, so softly; the glee in Isabel’s face made Felicity’s stomach drop. It was the kind of expression a child might spare a kitten, before the child kills said kitten just to see what would happen.

“Know about what?”

Laurel’s voice shook as she spoke; she was afraid of her. Felicity figured Isabel had been the one to kidnap her but for Felicity it was more of the fact that Isabel was now a super solider skilled in the art of hurting others. And Felicity… was not.

**You have me**

Slade… yes she did-

“About me and Oliver.” Isabel murmured.

Felicity almost rolled her eyes, stepping away from Laurel in a moment of clarity. *Get Isabel away from the one person in the room who can’t recover from a sword to the chest.* “If you really think there was ever a ‘you and Oliver’ then you need some serious therapy.”

Isabel’s teeth shone. “Jealous?”

Slowly shaking her head, Felicity adopted a pitying expression and watched as Isabel’s smug venire slipped off her face like water. “…No. I don’t get jealous of an easy lay.”

The pure rage thrown at her then almost made Felicity run a mile. She was saved this massive embarrassment by Laurel who, very understandably, sounded like she wanted to gag. “You and Oliver? What, was he desperate?”

*Wow,* the laughed that cackled free from Felicity became a hasty cough.

“Probably.” Isabel replied; a curious look in her eye – she stared at Laurel. “Probably because someone wasn’t giving him what he needed.”

Laurel frowned. “Me and Ollie aren’t-”

“I wasn’t referring to you.” Isabel chewed on the inside of her mouth; a bitter laugh flirting with her oesophagus. “You think it’s *always* about you; you self-absorbed little-”
Felicity tried to interject. “Isabel-”

“He said *her* name.” Still locked in a battle of the gazes with Laurel, Isabel absently flickered a sword at her. “*During,* Oh God. Finally her eyes, those brown killers, slid back to Felicity. “He said *Felicity* when he came.”

…I know.

Of course she did. Even if the earth beneath her feet didn’t feel quite so solid anymore, she knew. It felt real. Important. Hell; she’d say *his.* In fact…

She had.

It was humiliating to admit actually, even to herself. Because she’d been truly alone when she had.

When The Count had taken her, she’d whispered it. When the Glades had fallen, she’d said it through tears. When he’d been injected with an anti-coagulant she’d spoken it as a prayer. When Slade tried to kill his mother and sister she’d thought it as a shield. When they’d held each other she’d murmured it.

When, at night – in her bed – she’d groaned and whimpered it as she gave in to a very real need and pushed her fingers into her panties.

All those times she’d gone home, too stressed to sleep. When she’d left the Foundry feeling such relief that her boy’s were okay after a brutal shoot out. Those moments when being alone wasn’t something to savour, wasn’t freedom. And the times she’d been afraid of what was outside her door, of what could lurk in the dark, of the knowledge of the type of men and women that truly existed in world, when she’d wanted to cower in the corner with all the lights on…

It had become a ritual. Sometimes, it was the only thing that made her feel like herself. Wrapped in the sensation of pleasure.

*Was that… bad?*

That she thought of Oliver? That he was her safe place?

“You don’t look surprised.” Isabel muttered, head slightly tilting as if to offset the surprise.

Felicity did nothing but look at her, upset that something so private had been used as a weapon.

Laurel’s expression was a testament to that. She’d… *paled.*

…And took a step back. *Away* from Felicity. *Closer* to Isabel.

Alarmed, Felicity’s arm shot out. “Laurel, don’t-”

Isabel cut her off. “No Laurel,” her right arm sliced up and the sword in her grasp was suddenly pointed at the lawyer’s sculptured chin. “Stay.” The sharp edge pressed ever so gently to Laurel’s neck and Laurel froze: staring at Isabel in horror. “Neither of you are leaving this place alive. Orders from above.”

Trembling, Felicity fisted her hands. “Want to bet?”

“Bravado? Or something else?” Mouth twisting, Isabel dropped the polite attitude. “He may have told me not to harm a hair on either of your heads but I don’t always listen to him and I’ve been waiting a long time to-“
“-Good.” Felicity snapped, cutting her off before shooting towards her.

*And I’ve finally snapped.*

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Chapter End Notes

Anyone notice that after episode 4x19 aired Twitter was silent? Twitter is never silent when Arrow is involved; half the cast use it to sell the show and their characters. Now normally people like Stephen Amell, Wendy and Marc G are all over Twitter like live wires both pre and post episodes. So why weren't they?

Well, that's because they caved. They caved into KC's agent and gave her run of the mill; the mill being the episode script. From what I've heard, she wanted Oliver to want to stay with her after Tommy's death but I figure SA put his foot down.

Oh look, Laurel; he ran away from you again anyway. She came across more heartless than heartbroken. Episode 2x1 showed a very bitter, very regretful, very guilty and very grief stricken Laurel Lance - it was something we could empathize with, something that humanized her when little else did - who told Oliver that it didn't matter what he or she wanted- they couldn't be together. He immediately agreed. But then her character dies and all of a sudden that all changes. After Tommy's death, Laurel - who was supposed to be in love with Tommy - is looking gayly forward to the future, all to the shock of one Oliver Queen who wasn't even thinking of moving on when his best friend had just been buried.

She could have just left the show in peace but nope. She's done this before and I shouldn't be surprised but the directors etc don't usually cave.

No wonder no one was live on Twitter for 24 hours afterwards. For hardcore fans this must have been extremely confusing since MG released a comic strip he stated was canon of a LL so grief stricken she wouldn't leave her room to talk to 'Ollie' who she was supposed to have been the love of her life in 4x21.

Jbuffyangel calls this Laurel logic. The actress and the writers have, many times, had Laurel jump back and forth in her thoughts and decisions.

She spent most of season 3 telling Oliver in all sorts of ways that she didn't love him - including in words. But just before she dies it's... actually the other way around?

I found it very hard to be sad during her death scene because she just irks me.

However, I will not give up on her character for Beautiful Crime - and yeeeep the chapter I was working on for that was also destroyed.

Rant over. I just don't like it when the personal wants of actors mess up timeline's in shows. It can get confusing. Hope you enjoyed.
Part 11

Chapter Notes

This should have been out weeks ago! Sorry guys: I lost my work because of a virus and had start all over. It was tough going. But I hope you enjoy this one: originally it had some Laurel/Sara pov but it didn't quite work. Either time I wrote it. I kind of like the outcome though...

Part 11

He wouldn’t change a thing. Not a single thing. I have it now. He wasn’t letting it go. Not for anyone. Not for the world...

“Oliver, there’s a group of them heading your way.” Dig said over the com channel.

Racing through the city on his Ducati, body fixed low in the seat to bend and swerve with each turn, Oliver shouted over the wind. “How? I thought you said you’d taken care of the rest?”

“I thought we had but somehow they slipped past us.” There was a pause where Oliver heard Dig talking to Lyla before he spoke again; tone low and sounding 100% done. “Jesus; more good news.”

Oliver gritted his teeth. “What?”

“Sara, Nyssa, and her band of merry ninja’s took off. Two guesses where they’re heading.”

He didn’t need to guess.

They were gunning for Slade. They wouldn’t rest until he was six feet under.

Pulling up close to the factory, a small part of him wondered why he wasn’t thrilled to hear this, why he also wasn’t targeting the same psychopath who was trying to destroy all he holds dear… but it was simple, really.

He’d made a promise. To Felicity. And he wouldn’t break it - not for the world - no matter how tempted he was. And he was tempted. Extremely tempted. Since-

-I stabbed her with the head of the arrow she so bravely shot into my neck

His hands twisted over each handle bar.

She was in there, right now; alone. It was all he couldn’t think about. Confronting Slade and god only knows what. Fighting for him, for them – for they were a ‘them’ now. A unit; not a pair. His fight was her fight and her fight was his. A partnership he could have only ever hoped to live for in the past. He’d focused on the feelings it inspired in him - on the kiss they’d shared - to carry him through the last few hours.

It couldn’t be all they’d have, that one instant. That all they’d know of each other was this... fear. The constant battles, the threats on their lives, the small snatches of moments and looks as people,
objects, places and demons from the past separated them.

*Let this have been the right choice.*

The belief he had in her was - is - absolute. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t terrified. That his heart wasn’t fully with hers and that the constant division was an echo of a painful void he hoped - prayed, begged - wouldn’t be given excuse to remain so. That didn’t mean the plan, as badly timed as it was, wouldn’t fail. In another’s hands - in Laurel’s, Sara’s, or even his mother’s hands, in *Diggle’s* hands - it definitely would.

And having Sara and Nyssa now heading her way… it wasn’t a positive upscale to this battle.

He wasn’t blind.

The way Felicity had very subtly avoided being alone with Sara the night before… he’d noticed, of course he had. All he did was watch her, follow her, learn her through every available sense that he possessed.

He’d seen her trembles, her shakes… the Mirakuru. And it wasn’t something he could take away, wasn’t something he could ease simply by taking her hands in his, by tucking her close to his heart – she owned it, he couldn’t lie – or by whispering in her ear that she’d be fine because the world didn’t make sense if she wasn’t.

And in all this he’d seen how Felicity had managed to not glance at Sara once, whilst Sara…

Yes, Sara had made her stance very clear. He didn’t really need to ask her what that was; it was in everything she did. That self-assured layer of skin she hadn’t worn the morning after they’d spoken in the Queen Mansion kitchen, was very much present *after* her and Felicity’s return from the Foundry. She’d made a decision and he couldn’t leave it alone. Not after seeing Felicity so subdued, so unlike herself afterwards, knowing he couldn’t comfort her the way he wanted, not yet.

*It started in the middle of them slipping on their vigilante regalia; Oliver and Sara. Away in the corner, Nyssa and her entourage of assassins were dealing out their specialised arrowheads and Felicity…*

*She was as far away from all of them as she possibly could be. Upstairs. With John.*

*Pulling on his gloves, he spoke to Sara without looking at her. “What did you say to her?”*

*Her reply was absent minded. “To who?”*

*Raising his gaze, he waited until the silence made her look back. When she did, the hard stare he sent her spoke volumes – don’t be coy with me. “Felicity.”*

*She sighed, shaking her head. “It was just girl talk Ollie.”*

*He was sure it was.*

*“You threatened her.” He stated; 100% believing it.*

*Soft eyebrows met on the bridge of her nose. “Did I?” They rose high when his silence told her the answer. “You can’t just-”*

*“Can’t what?” There was no soft expression, no indulgent affection, no remnant of a history that should have remained buried... He was angry; at Slade, at her too. At Laurel for her presumptions.*
At how he hadn’t been able to spend the last few days the way he’d sorely wished too. Alone. Loving his girl. Feeling her love him back. And he was allowing himself to fully show it. “What, Sara?” Did she want him to lie and stay clear of it? Impossible. “Can’t not let you get away with it? Felicity doesn’t deserve that.”

She shifted briefly – the words ‘he doesn’t understand’ shouting out from her to him - “Look, Ollie-”

But he cut her off in a short whisper. “Don’t Ollie me.”

She blinked; her mouth closing.

Ollie.

Come on Ollie, let’s do shots!

Ollie, I miss you, come on; it’ll only be for 20 minutes. And bring the tequila. They won’t notice we’re gone…

No one does a party like Tommy and Ollie.

You have a girlfriend? Then don’t tell her; it’ll be our little secret.

Dude, only you could bang three girls in one night when one of them is your actual, real-time girlfriend.

You’ve dropped out of another college? Who do I need to send a check to? Nothing’s too good for my beautiful boy.

It’s the latest high Ollie, come play with me.

No. More.

He hadn’t been Ollie in a long time. He knew it was only a word but the memories associated with it always came directly to the surface in the face of Laurel, Sara and Quentin. Even his mother. As it was, only Thea could refer to him as such without his stomach rolling.

And he waited but she didn’t say a word, as if she knew that any excuse she made or any of the reasons she could explain, wouldn’t be good enough.

Didn’t mean she shouldn’t try.

He stared at her. A minute went by. Still nothing.

Then he was speaking - his voice rough as sandpaper, low as a murmur - and the words were out before he knew what he was even going to say.

“Do you want me to threaten you?” Hazarding a guess from the way her eyes widened, from how she leaned back, he’d say she hadn’t expected him to say that. Not even close. His brow rose. “Do I need to?”

“No.” She breathed and was shaking her head before he’d finished. “You’d-”

“Yes.” She breathed and was shaking her head before he’d finished. “You’d.”

“Do I need to tell you exactly what I’ll do should any harm come to her,” unhurried, he pointed his finger in Sara’s face, “because of you? You’re not exempt.” He dropped his arm. “The fact that we’ve known each other for years makes you even less free from my judgment than Slade.”
Because you should know better. And you should have trusted me. But you didn’t.

*Mouth open, Sara observed at him as if she’d never seen him before. “You’re going to threaten me?”*

*The words were forced out on a choke and something in his chest tightened. Years of memories, tides of change, different places, different people… in many ways he and Sara had travelled the most, extending themselves the farthest, had changed more than anyone else… and now he was letting it go. Letting go of a connection - though he’d always be her friend - that did more harm than good. To both of them.*

*And it was painful how incredibly freeing that felt.*

*“You’d hurt me?” She prodded again and not believing it for a second.*

*But she had to… because for Felicity, there was no stop button. No off-switch. He didn’t know why it was like that with her, why he was so decidedly attune to every hurt she now accrued or why it was suddenly very easy to say ‘for her I would’, ‘for her I will’, ‘for her I can’…*

*It just was.*

*When you find it - your reason, your ‘everything’ - the love you feel becomes a logical insanity. A required passion. The best part of existence. Not a set of chains. Knowing now, what that felt like – because of her – was the greatest gift he’d ever received. It wasn’t something he could ever remember feeling; how an emotion could simultaneously lift you up and make you fall- and for that to be a good thing, the best thing.*

*He hadn’t known when it’d started; he’d already been half way there before he’d begun to realise.*

*He thought he’d loved before, thought he’d felt that deep yearning portrayed on-screen by overpaid actors. He’d been so blind. Such a fool to believe that what he’d had was as close to home that he could feel.*

*Swallowing, because ‘home’ was upstairs, putting on a brave face and making him dream dreams of all the things he wanted to do - would do - when this was over, he spoke in a rumble. He spoke truth. No matter how much it hurt Sara, because she needed to hear it. “If you intentionally go out to hurt her?” Expression tightening, he looked her right in the eye. “Absolutely yes. I won’t hesitate.”*

*For a moment, Sara just took him in.*

*Until, finally, she whispered. “I actually believe you.” She did, he could see it; the silent astonishment. “Trouble is Oliver, sometimes there is no choice.”*

*“I agree.” But their meanings were opposing ends of a cruel spectrum. She saw that too, her composure faulting before she straightened, her eyes lifting briefly up to the ceiling as she blinked away the regret he’d glimpsed.*

*“Is she ready?” She asked.*

*Nodding, he tucked a few spare syringes into his jacket, before turning away. “She is, but she isn’t going with you.” He threw over his shoulder as he made his way to the stairs.*

*Remembering it, he realised how unwise he’d been to expect Sara to have listened; he hadn’t gotten anywhere.*
Briefly, he’d thought she’d understood about his request – that Slade Wilson be kept alive for incarceration – to prove their control, to show a united front in a city that desperately needed to be shown the brighter half of a dark dawn and turn an evil into something positive; to become the heroes Starling was beginning to view them as, the hero in me that Felicity had seen from the beginning.

*I hope she never stops.*

In the end it didn’t matter; not what Sara would or wouldn’t do or any of it.

When this was all over, he’d show Felicity. He’d show her everything. He’d tell her all the things that needed to be said, all the words he craved to say, that he’d forced himself to swallow down, that he knew would change their dynamic, the team… all of it.

And he was *aching* for it all to happen immediately. Because when the rest of your life stands before you in heels, lipstick and glasses – all red – you want the rest of your life to begin as soon as humanly possible.

But he also knew *exactly* why Sara had called Nyssa. And that was the meat of it: *Nyssa.*

True, the League had made exceptional allies so far but Sara’s true goal had always been to split from him, because she knew he wouldn’t let her do what she intended if she stayed by his side. To kill Slade. Kill Isabel Rochev.

The concept of them setting an example for others to follow seemed to fly over her head.

But the worst part?

He knew that if Felicity put so much as a toe in Sara’s way - and she would because she was Felicity and she understood a very pivotal part of him that others just *didn’t* - that Sara, and by extension Nyssa, would do everything and anything to stop her, to put her down.

And that. *Wasn’t.* **Happening.**

Not ever.

*Over my dead body.* Jaw tightening, Oliver spoke again. “When did they split from you?”

“*Not sure; I wasn’t keeping eyes on them.*”

Because they were supposed to be allies.

“How far out are you?”

“At least ten minutes.” Digg didn’t sound at all happy about that. “*Watch yourself, man.*”

“Always do.” He cut the link, eyes roving the building; searching for weaknesses…

*Wait.* His eyes narrowed. On the far side of the ex-factory, sat an unmanned motorbike and a black sedan. *They’re already here.*

**But so am I.**

Swinging a leg off his bike he strode resolutely forwards, pulling out his bow - inch by inch - from its place on his back. And breathing deep, because there was nothing he couldn’t hit.
I’m coming. He stepped into a run. I’m coming Felicity.

“Felicity!”

It didn’t register. She wasn’t there…

She hadn’t had as clue. Not really. She’d had *no* idea what she was doing.

Having a plan? Yep, that would have been preferable to the none-existent ‘plan b’ she was adhering to. If plan A was all logic and tactical precision – or at least what plan A *would have been if I’d had a plan A* – then plan B was purely instinctively driven.

She wished - *dreamed* - she was so *fly* that she could say ‘*psh, I don’t do plans*’ but, yeah, her cool only extended to computers.

And this? This was *different*.

“Felicity, stop!”

*I can’t*. She honestly couldn’t. *I won’t*. And didn’t want to.

It had become a blur. A choice to make *made*; leading to a light of a specific colour.

*Red.*

Always *Red*.

It was everywhere - all she could see - like the world, her world, was drowning in it.

*It isn’t me, not any of this.* She wasn’t *this* person. Yet it didn’t seem to matter. Her body didn’t feel it and her mind had followed in that particular lack of regard.

…She didn’t understand how it happened, or why she wasn’t stopping.

It had started the way all fights start; instigation leading to action and response… Isabel was a woman adept at antagonising others. But Felicity hadn’t meant to do this. *Not this.*

She’d told herself that she’d finally lost it, rushing at Isabel like she had. But it had been meant as a play, an act; even a *joke*. Just a joke.

*I need to keep her away from Laurel,* that’s all she’d focused on.

During that pointless discussion, she remembered feeling a little agitated with both women; at Isabel for her natural callousness and at Laurel for her *priorities*. It was odd because, even though the situation more than called for it, it took a lot for Felicity Smoak to be so easily affected, especially by women she knew were just going out to hurt her. Isabel had needed to let off steam and Laurel… she’d just wanted to *know*; to be told, to be part of something and for once be let in on one of Oliver’s secrets.
Like she had an obsession… maybe she did. Maybe we all do. Oliver was definitely the type of man to inspire such feelings in women.

“He said her name. During. He said Felicity when he came.”

Pretty sure that wasn’t a secret Laurel wanted to hear though.

It really hadn’t been - as crass as it was to throw that in the face a woman he’d slept with only a year prior and a woman who couldn’t stop thinking about sleeping with him - and she’d tried to imagine what that could have felt like, to hear those words; words you’d never expected to hear. Felicity had never expected to hear them either.

Did it make her bad? That all she felt, every time she heard them - other than shock - was warmth? Was a soothing layer of I love him so much? Was a hazy repetition of I need to feel him?

The constant longing to hear his voice for herself as it broke over her name?

However, the look on Laurel’s face alone had been a testament to how she felt about the fact and it wasn’t a good feeling; part disbelief – that Oliver would ever a) sleep with Isabel and b) say another woman’s name during sex – part disgust. Some anger there too. A dash of bitterness. An echo of regret…

…That it wasn’t her name?

I’m sorry Laurel.

Because she was; the whole thing was something Felicity still had trouble believing and would never wish it on someone else.

But then Isabel had placed a sword at Laurel’s throat.

The spike of fear Felicity had felt on seeing that razor edge so close to piercing the lawyer’s skin - at imaging Oliver’s face and Sara’s, should Laurel come to harm - had transformed swiftly to fire. Anger. A whispered intent. Then-

Stop her before she really gets going

And that had been the cusp of it, having him there. The ghost of a bygone Slade Wilson. He’d helped navigate her through the fear; had taken and channelled it into something useful. Something she’d never experienced…

The moment they’d clashed she’d sensed the change, the indistinct lines… it was like foreplay how everything faded into nothing taking her to a new plane. Discovering a new way of seeing the world. A way that was simply red.

And since everything was red, blood became invisible. Blending into the background. A pretty abstract. Completely without meaning to her now. So when she saw it… it meant less than nothing.

“For Felicity!”

Laurel.

Why is she yelling my name? The shout made her lose focus – but only briefly. The barest trace of
awareness of where she was and what she was doing slipped in and out of her mind like sand.

She shook off the voice like an irritation – an errant fly. It didn’t really compute. Not on anything more than an ephemeral level. In fact there wasn’t anything that touched her, nothing genuinely reached past the surface of her skin except…

“I love you.”

A snap in the air told her a bone had broken; but not her own.

**Good**

She wasn’t doing it for him.

*I need to say it back. That she loves him.*

“...And he will use that. But he won’t try to hurt me. He’ll just hurt you. He’ll aim for you. Mirakuru or not, it isn’t something I can chance.”

*The simultaneous terror and sheer happiness on hearing those words fall from his perfect lips... they’re so soft. Like pillow mountains. But firm too. Could reach down inside her and speak words through touch alone. Words she needed – it wasn’t even an option at this point – to hear spoken over and over and over again, through his body. Through his fingers... his eyes. His mouth.*

It was why this had to end. Quickly. Isabel was the nuisance, not the danger.

**Exactly**

“But that doesn’t mean he won’t go after Laurel. Felicity,” she really did love how he said her name; all breathy and emotional, “if that happens he’ll take her someplace away from the fighting, someplace near here. I told Laurel to get out of the city but she insisted on being with her father. If Slade does go after her, we’ll be spread too thin to do anything.”

She’d found her; I found Laurel Oliver, she’ll be okay. He wouldn’t lose another person.

So close she could count his lashes his words were barely audible. “What I’m asking is a lot, too much, I know but-”

“It isn’t.”

It really wasn’t, would never be.

Quick as a flash he was with her, looking into her. “You’re trusting me. With everything.” It was everything, because she knew exactly what he was asking.

He was risking his world for the sake of the City and everything he was doing told her that he thought his world... was her.

That’s it. It’s all she needed. It’s all I wanted and about 100% more than I thought I’d ever get. She lived in that memory as she fought, seeing only him; feeling his breath against her lips, his fingers on her neck...

So, yes; it didn’t touch her, didn’t matter. Fully wrapped as she is, in a heaven only she knew existed. Sweeping beneath Isabel’s outstretched arm, Felicity spin-kicked down and snapped Isabel’s shinbone with the heel of her foot – a third bone, the sound airing like the crack of a
breaking tree branch – as Isabel’s shriek rendered the air with violence. A sound that pulsed through her and into her skin, under it, forcing her further forwards. She manoeuvred those two blades into her own hands in a series of strikes and twists that would ordinarily make her jaw drop to the floor in an ‘I actually did that’ fashion.

Isabel’s face as it contorted in rage didn’t make her feel a thing before it crumbled at the searing agony of her swords using her sides - her ribs - as a sharpening tool. No pride there, not anymore. And nothing inside prevented her fists from connecting with every inch of Isabel she could reach.

“Stop it; you’ll kill her!”

It didn’t matter. Not the flecks of blood and spittle raining across her hands and neck; didn’t matter that Isabel’s face looked more like a puffy mess of skin and cartilage – the woman was laced with Mirakuru: she’d heal. Felicity didn’t care. Wasn’t touched by it, she just kept moving. The viciousness of it didn’t halt her and she wanted Laurel to just. Stop. Talking-

“Stop it! You’ll kill her!”

That’s the idea.

**Primary objective: neutralise the target**

*He’s right. Isabel Rochev wasn’t the target.*

**This is taking too long**

It was. But it wouldn’t, if Laurel would simply stop distracting her. *Why is she trying to stop me? Why did she have to get in the way? Why was everything her business?*

When her response was to *ignore*, a hand grasped her shoulder from behind – where she was working over Isabel – and gripped tightly, tugging her back with as much force a human could.

“Listen to me! You need to stop-”

You need to stop.

In a whirl, Felicity twisted – grasping at Laurel’s hand to *bend* it. Sideways, forwards, backwards, what did it matter? It did the job.

Slade’s memories told her it would. They were at once subliminal and sublime.

“Ah!” Laurel’s cry drowned out Isabel’s shallow breaths as Felicity forced her back – forced Laurel to stop getting in her way – towards a wall.

With Felicity’s hand around her throat, Laurel’s feet lifted off the floor; inch by inch.

Felicity… there was no recognition. It was *Laurel*, but it didn’t compute that there was a problem. Later, she’d internalise it all. Guilt would pile high and she’d try to apologise.

But for now? She wanted her surroundings to stop crowding about her.

*Fear is the mind killer.* It just didn’t compute to Laurel how afraid Felicity truly was. Why else would she relinquish control over to Mirakuru?

“I said to *not* get in the way.” She started and it was with a cold clarity that she spoke, so unlike
herself that Laurel actually stilled. “To not,” feeling a slice of irritation so deep it made her lips thin out over her teeth, Felicity pushed Laurel higher against the stone, “interrupt.” Each syllable was defined.

And Felicity had warned her, right as she’d pounced into action, she’d shouted at the woman to not come close to either her or Isabel, not at any one moment. Why can’t she just listen? She sees just fine but doesn’t listen. It was a trait Felicity understood Laurel to possess in spades. Now that she’d seen it for herself. Selective hearing.

“Why did you touch me?” Tightening her hold, Felicity waited for the tell-tale gasp of a set of lungs begging for air. “You did everything I told you not to do…”

Trailing off, Felicity abruptly realised she was shaking. She took a moment, to blink at it and take a breath. To think. Her eyes flickered to her hand - there was blood practically coating it - down her arm to the floor.

Remember.

How quickly she’d gone from defence to offence.

How scared she’d been to being so close to those shining swords. Something she’d trusted Oliver with as she’d leant into him, sharing his warmth and his strength…

“It’s just that Roy… he said the Mirakuru made him frustrated, that he’d shake with it. But I just feel afraid. All the time. Leaving a room, entering it, talking to people: it doesn’t go away.”

Unless you turn it into something else.

Something that made her conscience, her empathy and kindness, fade into silence.

And she’d heard Slade whisper in a thrill of heat through her blood; Let me help you How he’d literally meant it – meant that he was trying to keep her alive.

Meant that the hand around Laurel’s throat wasn’t governed fully by her own mind. Meant that a drug had literally taken control of everything.

Breathe Felicity

Her shaking increased triple-fold. Oh God. It was like seeing again; as if she’d worn the wrong glasses and was suddenly free of them.

Her hand... around Laurel’s throat… Laurel, who was looking down at her in real fear and confusion, like she was a monster, a surprise, dangerous - and it began to twitch, her hand, her fingers. Fluttering over Laurel’s pulse. What am I doing? Part of her understood the problem and wanted to rectify it but the rest of her was too slow to catch up.

Thankfully, words weren’t beyond her reason.

“Laurel?” She whispered, eyes wide and so very sorry – and it was a breathless attempt. As if Felicity were the one being strangled.

Because Oliver…

She was hurting Laurel. His Laurel.
Yes; she knew their relationship was well and truly over, that he’d chosen her – how incredible and wonderful that was – but there was still a history of feeling there. A lifetime of pining and waiting and loving. Him choosing her didn’t make Felicity exempt from his own confusion, his disappointment, his anger. Please don’t be mad at me.

Please understand that it wasn’t me, not really. Her first words after his confession couldn’t be ‘I hurt Laurel’. They had to be I love you in a way I didn’t think was possible for humans to love, something good, worthy. I’m already ruining it. Already making it another memory for him to lock away, to not want to see…

He would always witnessed horrendous acts of violence but she’d never wanted to add to that.

Something in Laurel’s eyes changed then, as if she could suddenly see Felicity’s cognizance of her surroundings once more.

“I’m s-sorry.” Willing her hand to release Laurel’s throat - let go, let go right now - she strained, staring at those fingers - loosen up, do SOMETHING - and feeling her eyes water, her neck dampen with anxious sweat.

…And her grip started to slowly loosen.

“It’s okay.” Laurel gasped, seeing the fight in Felicity’s face and realising just how not in control the IT genius was. The hand that had been digging nails into Felicity’s arm relaxed into a firm hold. “You’re doing it.”

Felicity nodded. “Just give me a minute.” Please. To breathe. “I... it’s almost-”

-An arrowhead punched clean through her bicep.

Everything silenced.

Body jerking at the force, Felicity’s head threw back of its own accord, her eyes wide with the shock - the sensation of ice ripping through her tendon - of actually being shot with an arrow, I’ve been shot with an arrow, and her mouth opened in a soundless scream.

Sliced – it pierced through her nerve endings. The Mirakuru she’d been fighting down invaded her entirely, comprehension of why this wasn’t the best thing, left her entirely before flooding her brain with dark thoughts...

And she found she just… couldn’t handle… the… rest…

Absently, she noticed Laurel drop to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Since the arm holding her was the one shot, she’d let her go. The lawyer scurried away - out of the line of fire; so uncharacteristic of Laurel Lance - taking deep breaths as she touched at her neck. But it didn’t matter. None of it did.

Laurel’s shock, her hurt…

The factory she stood in, where Slade was somewhere within its walls…

Isabel lying sedentary - unconscious - against the pipeline…

Staggering back - a stumble really - Felicity’s blue eyes travelled to her right.

There.
Head to toe in League Armour, Nyssa stood poised; holding her bow and arrow under her chin… towards Felicity.

“You get only one chance, Felicity Smoak.” She stated, aloud. “There will not be another.”

Sure.

Head tilting sideways - gaze blank save for the shine of a cold calculus - she took her in. Whatever makes her stop talking. Too much information. The Mirakuru didn’t allow her to process it fully.

Sara was there too, standing just behind the raven haired assassin.

Briefly looking to her, she saw that Sara’s focus fixed on Laurel – her eyes screaming words and emotions left unsaid – until Felicity straightened. Then those eyes slammed right into her. And they were such a magnificent shade of betrayal, of regret; feelings Felicity just wasn’t capable of right then.

So, she simply looked back.

It was different this time. That untouched palace of safety in her mind. It felt different. Normally, she’d be screaming or crying. Or asking questions and babbling incessantly. All of it out of fear. Or pain.

Now?


As if she had all the time in the world, Felicity reached up with a hand and pushed – increment by bloodied increment – the arrowhead back the way it had come.

It was totally cringe worthy, a barf-fest in progress; icky and yuck and hell no… it was satisfying. Gratifying in the flicker of unease the swept across Sara’s face, in the gasp coming from her sister who still stayed down… because Felicity hadn’t looked away, hadn’t reacted at all to the pain she was sure to have been in; she hadn’t felt a thing. Not a thing.

Expressionless, Felicity let the shaft fall to the ground with a metallic clatter against concrete.

“Felicity.” Sara began; a whisper-thin attempt at building a trust between them; at mending a bridge, at trying to connect…

Locking eyes with her, Felicity conveyed in a single glance the futility of her half arsed effort to placate Oliver Queen. They’d seen her with her hand around Sara’s sister’s throat. She knew exactly what she was thinking in that ruthless consciousness; she’d seen the same look directed at Roy. Sara wanted to put a bullet in her. There was no hatred there; only a wearisome burden. Only fear. And anger.

Felicity couldn’t let it stop her from reaching Slade Wilson. That was all that mattered now.

And Sara saw this slither of comprehension flash through Felicity; watched as it was processed and subsequently brushed aside, watched Felicity’s eyes follow her movements as Sara raised her staff so that both her hands were wrapped securely around it.

A pure lance of heat pulsed through Felicity - she just wanted to hurt them. It was all she could feel. Hurt Sara and hurt Nyssa. Hurt anyone else who kept her in fear, who drowned her in the dark, who tried to quell her with their cynicisms and worries and fallacies, who threatened because
they were afraid.

Back ing up – a cool step behind her to the left – Felicity stretched out, her fingers searching as her eyes remained fixed on Sara and Nyssa - Nyssa who hadn’t once dropped her aim, who hadn’t faltered – until her hand touched, gripped, the handle of a sword. Then two swords.

They were in her hands and she was rising without thought. In a flurry, she twisted them in her hold; one sword under her arm and the other over her head before she touched the tips down… then scraped them across the floor, casting sparks.

“Oh…” With a smirk that could only be described as suicidal, Nyssa dropped her bow. Then reached for her own sword. “This will be fun.”

“Laurel, get back.” Sara ordered and her sister – for once – listened.

But then Sara was moving forwards, countering the sudden swiftness of Felicity’s kamikaze run at Nyssa, who was now grinning like a lunatic. Sara intercepted one sword but the blade quickly twisted and sliced up her rod, leaving Sara no choice but to drop it. Ducking around the flow of sword strokes – simplistic in design, lethal in intent – she didn’t realise how Felicity was lulling her into a false security until a foot locked around her own from where Felicity stood behind her, before lifting it upwards.

Sara tripped forwards and a roundhouse planted in her stomach made the warrior woman fall back.

Eyes briefly following Sara, Felicity inhaled… exhaled. Inhaled.

…She turned away. One down. At least for a few seconds.

Slade’s memories of combat were exquisitely detailed. It made for an easy transition of form and function and self-confidence: from him to her.

It was why she could block that strike to her back, why she could rotate away, could fence around and out of Nyssa’s attacks and could parry each strike. It was why her surroundings blurred around her.

It was why she didn’t see the green.

“FELICITY!”

Nothing touched him.

Coming to a halt - almost skidding - he’d caught notice of Laurel on the floor, clutching her throat. Isabel unconscious and off to the side; rivulets of blood clouding her broken features. Sara picking herself up off the ground, staggering towards her staff. Nyssa weaving - an artistic flow of swords and speed and lithe movements - between each of Felicity’s feints, her reposts and strikes.

Standing there, frozen in place just metres from the open archway of the large steel room, she was all he could see: Felicity Smoak, dodging blows from an experienced, battle hardened killer - an assassin trained from birth - and making it all look like she too had been fighting all her life.
It was fluidic.
Surreal.
*Beautiful.*

All his. She was *his.*

And seeing her this way, seeing the person she could have been—a warrior like himself—just made him adore the woman she was now, his brilliant IT girl, and respect the many versions of what might been. It didn’t matter. Everything she did humbled him, made him thank the universe for creating her…

But now, all he could feel was the very real fear that she was—in this moment—untouchable.

What if he couldn’t stop her? What if she didn’t recognise him?

It was stunning, seeing Slade’s movements in her feminine form. Stunning… and wrong.

Everything in him wanted to protect her, keep her safe. *I’ve always tried to keep her safe, I promised that from the start.* To have her exposed to something so profoundly violent made him quake inside; scared to death that she’d be destroyed by it, yet realising that if her inner strength—the light she beheld—could carry his own darkness, could toss it aside and make it seem so superfluous a mask—enough to render him mute—then she could more than handle this madness.

The sheer respect he felt for her would never let him place her in any kind of gilded cage.

But that also didn’t mean he didn’t feel every tap of metal against metal, didn’t suffer a fierce flood of endorphins at every close shave between her and sharp steel—Mirakuru be damned—or fist or foot to her precious skin; he hadn’t blinked. Not once. Eyes peeled. Watching. Waiting for the moment…

The tip of her sword sliced clean through Nyssa cloak and in an athletic twist, the cloak was pulled clean off the woman’s shoulders. Clang of sword on sword didn’t quite cover the laugh thrown out from Nyssa’s gullet; a smile so sharp across her face he’d have thought it would cut whoever it was aimed at.

She was *enjoying* herself.

From the side, Sara flew in and suddenly it was a no bars held brawl. Only one where critical injury was the intent.

Two against one.

He needed to stop this. Now.

Then Sara pulled a move—so swiftly he almost didn’t catch it—that made his mouth dry of all moisture, made his heart temporarily stop. It was an action made solely to *fully* incapacitate. If performed correctly, it would break the spine.

On a human, it would kill. On a Mirakuru host it would temporarily disable. Either way it would be so painful it would blind the victim.

And he couldn’t fathom that happening. Not to *her.*

It tore out of him. “FELICITY!” Terror, a night’s worth of fights and resolve tied in a visceral ball
in his throat. It was impossible to understand.

*Sara.*

She’d do this, to Felicity? She’d use such a move on a woman she’d once professed to find cute, to like dearly as her friend, to admire as a comrade, to love as a sister, *she’d do this to the woman I can’t live without?*

Seething - he still hadn’t blinked; eyes fixed on the scene where three women engaged in combat thirty metres away from him, three women who hadn’t given him any notice yet, his hands fisted, muscles flexing so quickly they almost ceased and cramp wasn’t something he needed right then - he fought to push back the lance of fury that threatened to destabilise him…

But for all he tried, he only achieved in pulling out his bow. “Stop!”

Modulator or not, his voice rang as loud as gunfire. It didn’t matter that Felicity had somehow managed to evade the lethal strike, didn’t matter that Sara had gotten a second wind in her or that Laurel was crawling in his direction - looking for safety - and it didn’t matter that Diggle’s voice was abruptly in his ears, conveying through the com unit that he was flooring it.

What mattered was that Nyssa pulled out – during an elegant rotation – a sliver of a knife and promptly lodged it in Felicity’s thigh.

She didn’t cry out. Didn’t blink or falter. Wasn’t *there.*

But he was.

“No!” He was moving before he understood that he was, jolting forwards in a quick sprint towards them, drawing an arrow and notching it. “Stop! Nyssa, *stop!*”

The arrow flew and as close as he now was, Nyssa didn’t have a hope in hell of stopping it before it scraped across her bicep. A deliberate misfire, but a warning nonetheless.

She cried out – more in surprise than pain – and stumbled backwards.

Unfortunately Felicity – fully immersed in a Mirakuru disposition – took advantage and made to, from the way she suddenly tucked in the elbow of her sword arm, spear Nyssa through the chest. The image of Sara closing in behind her flashed before him, a needle in hand and aimed for the back of Felicity’s neck… with the knife *still* lodged in her leg. With Slade still roaming the building. With danger still *everywhere.*

A second arrow shot out, hitting the floor inches from where Sara’s foot landed. Immediately she stopped; her head whipping round to glare at him. Cheek pressed to the hand holding another arrow in traction, he didn’t so much as blink her way.

Instead, he stared at his girl. And spoke, saying the only thing he could say, the only thing that made any sense to him just then.

“Fel-i-ci-ty.”

His tongue deliberately separating each syllable, it *stroked* across her name. He couldn’t help that it did and wasn’t sorry either.

And it wasn’t a voice filled with anger or fear. It wasn’t calm, persuasive.
It was raw, thick and full. Rough and uneven. Low. I should have been here. But there was no regret here. Just a want, a plea. For Felicity – his Felicity – to come back to him.

Aimed at nothing in particular, the point of his arrow didn’t once go to her. A threat on the other women about him to stay right where they are as his eyes told Felicity everything she needed to hear, everything he’d already said and a promise to do so much more. To do all.

Anything…

“You’re staring.”

Caught, he ducked his head; a flush of heat - it was ridiculous - rising to his face made his cheeks warm.

“I’m not… staring.”

It was crazy.

But the way she’d said it… like she didn’t understand why, like she couldn’t believe – she’d made it a question, not a statement – that he was staring, and that his reason might have nothing to do with the fact that she was talking, because she hadn’t been. Not a single word.

She didn’t need to be speaking, didn’t need to be animated for him to notice her. He always had. It was just that… before there’d been this acknowledgement that he couldn’t. That he shouldn’t. But now? That no longer exited. Erased entirely leaving almost overwhelming urges and he never wanted to feel its presence again; the feeling of loving a person but being unable to show them that you do.

Felicity’s mouth opened slightly –and his eyes couldn’t help but land right there – but she quickly closed it again, blinking attractively and making him wish that the distance between then – the table and the occupants of the room next door – would disappear. Entirely.

“…Oh.”

Oh.

Did she even realise how she looked when she said ‘oh’?

Did she know how her lips – her full, built to touch and tease and taste and lick and bite mouth - formed for that very expression? How they cupped the sound. How his eyes submissively fell to them, at once compelled and enticed; as if ordered.

She could command to him to die and he would.

She could demand him to live... and he would.

Jesus.

There wasn’t a way for him to understand that, for him to process the impossibility of that – that he might be worthy of a happy ever after. Just because Felicity believed he was.

I could lay it down at her feet – the years where he sang to the lowest rungs of humanity and revelled in its spell – all that I am and all that I was. And she would accept it. Just like he accepted everything she was.

The moment he’d stepped into her office and the first time he saw her in his father’s office two
years prior, he knew that he could. That he would. That he should.

It wasn’t wishful thinking. He just knew her, I know her, truly and fully. Knew her in a way he used to wish he’d known Laurel… but what had come of that hadn’t even come close.

And God was he glad that it never had.

It wasn’t for her. That had never been meant for Laurel. Or for any other woman.

Because he’d do it again – all of it.

He knew that now with a clarity that stunned him silent.

All the horrifying memories, all his bad choices, all the losses, every nightmare, each time he prayed for death. He’d relive the lot.

He’d make that conscious decision to sleep with Sara, knowing he was deliberately killing his relationship with Laurel, knowing Sara would read more in to it than planned. He’d step aboard the Queen’s Gambit – hiding from his fears, his phobia’s: his mother’s expectations for his education, his father’s desire for him to take over the company in ten years, his sister’s rose coloured glasses view of him, Laurel’s insistence that they move in together because their friend’s had moved in together - and not look back. He would make all the same choices that he made in those five years, because the alternative to this, to the here and right now - and that things might be different, that they might be other people - was terrifying to imagine.

Unthinkable.

I won’t lose this.

So he’d do it all over again. He’d lose his father. Shado. Slade. Sara. Tatiana. Tommy...

And he wouldn’t change a thing. Not a single thing.

If it meant that he got to fall in love with Felicity Smoak, he would remain the same. He wouldn’t change, thinking she deserved better, deserved more, she does deserve more. He wouldn’t alter. Wouldn’t falter.

Not if it meant that she could look at him like that; like he was the answer and not a question. Not an enigma or a riddle to solve and have, but never love.

It wasn’t easy to believe that she could – that anybody could love him the way he’d found he loved her - but she kept showing him. Kept giving him little reminders, little jolts of ‘I’m here’ and ‘you’re not perfect but your perfect for me’ talks and the occasional ‘I can’t believe we’re feeling the things we’re feeling or that we’re allowing ourselves to feel them’ hidden in those languid glances through windows and open doors...

It was like food; nourishment to a man like him who had, for so long, considered himself unequal to the task of loving another like this.

Dreams were precipitously possible now. Inevitable, even.

There was so much to feel, almost too much and it left him breathless; left him reeling and dizzy and light. As if he’d never experienced anything close and he hadn’t really. An excitement that trespassed precariously into a happiness he didn’t understand, or butterflies that infected every single organ in the body, not just his stomach. That tingling in his fingertips and his lips making
him overly aware of hers and the empty space between them. The urge to fly. The act of falling being to rise than to die.

It was almost like pain; feeling it yet having to store all that away. For now. An ache he wouldn’t scratch. A burn that he could and would bear forever - a privilege - because it was all her, all Felicity. It was right in front of him, his future; it was 5 foot 5 inches of bottle blonde IT genius just standing there, holding that crossbow and looking at him like that…

Looking at him like he was looking at her.

Like look was touch.

He could feel her on him; her hands on his chest - the ghost of when she’d leant against him the day before - her eyes trailing petal light on his face like fingertips against the planes, wondering what made him who he is and revelling in all she saw, all she sees right now.

Swallowing – at how just their eyes connecting could take away his breaths – his gaze dropped.

How did this happen to him?

This happiness. This want. This need… this hope.

And if her gaze was as corporal as the whisper thin brushes of her fingers, then his offered all that he was, to do with as she pleased.

Lay claim on me.

Like she could tumble into his depths and breathe deep. Like she could absorb everything that he is, let him permeate and be perfectly content in it, in him. Let her revel in leaving a piece of herself behind inside of him, behind his eyes, before sending it all back – her soul to his – just to make him feel her the same way.

Longing.

Is that what this is?

Not just desire. Not simply lust – it dismissed and insulted them both to think that was all this was. He wanted to be whole. To become this ‘whole’ creature with her, inside her, surrounding her, taking her in, possessing her the way she already possessed him.

To give and give and give until he just couldn’t anymore - though he’d want to, oh how he’d want to - until it was worship, until that worship was sinful in the best way. An obsession, a drive to make her live and writhe in his heat - in his gaze - and their hunger; pushing and pushing until that maddening ache inside her reaches a height she’d never manage on her own.

Then holding her, feeling every stroke of her skin on every slope of his. Feeling her quake and tumble off the precipice as she holds onto him, wrapped so completely around him and he to her that they could be one, not two.

For it was hers, all of it; his skin, his bones, his heart, his soul – they were hers to take and make and destroy.

Then he’d take.

He’d pound and grind and reach deep inside of her in a desperate bid to touch her soul, to trace
his initials there, until his muscles shake and ache for more, for all. Yielding to her arms and hands and fingers as they press and pull him to her, as they hold him there, on that edge of insanity. It was something he wanted so much to experience, because he never had:

That moment where the urge to stay right there, on that ledge, briefly eclipses the need to let go and fall into a white-washed numbness - an ecstasy - as if pure pleasure could be too much stimulation to be quantified by the brain.

He could lose control and let her take it for herself, before seeing that she was as lost as he… he’d take until she was giving, until who was feeling what was a blur of lines that no longer existed.

Until her hands and her scent and her voice and her love where the only sure things in the world. Where her heartbeat is his anchor, her chest his resting place and in her eyes; his soul. Where his hands hold her, giving her an eternal place to land.

Could they do that? Together? He was so sure they would…

It wasn’t about perfection: that didn’t exist. It was reality; messy and imperfect and complicated and tangible. Powerful. Inescapable. Wonderful. 100% wanted.

And it wasn’t just about sex either.

It might have been saying a lot, coming from an ex-playboy, but it never had been for him. It had never really been just about sex, not with any of the women he’d slept with. After Lian Yu, after China, after Coast City and Russia, after Starling… each relationship he’d had, had been a means of curing loneliness, of finding a connection, of attempting and failing to find a partner, of wondering if he could ever be worthy of being thought of in the way he secretly wished to be thought of.

With this, with Felicity… there was more, so much more. And they hadn’t even kissed, hadn’t touched or held.

In the past, he’d coveted what he couldn’t have. She was ‘his girl’.

But he’d also known, instinctively, that he’d miss her too.

Those times, when they’d been the only two people in the Foundry, he’d listen to her type away and realised he couldn’t remember the sound of silence. Couldn’t recall the noiseless ambience prior to her. Couldn’t remember when his world hadn’t consisted of painted fingernails, colourful dresses, glasses he’d – on more than one occasion – dreamed of sliding off her nose and found that… he really didn’t want to.

Even if they’d never met, he’d still miss her. Being in this life, without her? It was, again, an unthinkable reality.

Oliver had always viewed sex a means to communicate when words failed. It was his base self. So, was it any wonder, that all he could think about now, was showing her how he felt about her?

Making love to her.

With her making love to him back?

I’ve never had that. There had never been a moment where he’d felt a woman make love to him. And Felicity was an agent of honesty, of feeling. Did that mean… she would?
It was because he couldn’t find the words he needed to say that making love to her had ultimately become the presiding element to his thoughts. He wasn’t ready to make this real with words. And he really needed to, to try.

If his intent was to touch her.

He needed to; needed to for no other reason than because he wanted to. It wasn’t remotely funny; his body craved a touch he’d never truly experienced, yet, felt intimately acquainted with.

He knew her touch, her scent, her gaze… knew it like he knew his own.

And he’d wondered, prior to waking up in her arms the day before, if she could feel the same, if she felt even close. He’d been a fool. I know her better than I know myself.

He couldn’t stop reliving the memory of the day before, of waking up to see her face so close to his. They hadn’t moved during their sleep; his body half on top of hers. Warmth and other things made the muscles in his legs, back and shoulders feel luxuriously supple and comfortable. The softness beneath had been luring and he’d wrapped his arms around it before something registered that pillows shouldn’t breathe. Blinking awake he’d snuffled against the soft warmth before stilling. Before remembering. Before looking.

Before seeing.

He’d stared at her like he’d been struck.

It was… perfect.

All of it falling into place like a missing piece of a puzzle he hadn’t known he’d been building.

Unable to help himself, he’d pulled up a little higher than her on the bed and leant on his elbow. With hesitant fingers – and a held breath – he’d loosened a curl of her hair, only to let it fall leaving traces of tea tree and Felicity on his skin. He could smell her there, on the palm of his hand, resonating through him; like she’d always been there. It caused an urge; one he was desperately glad she wasn’t awake to notice – or feel. A burst of electricity shooting down his spine, tightening his thighs, curling his toes.

But he’d ignored it; too interested in the small pucker between her brows, the plump set of her lips oddly emphasised because she wore no makeup and... her.

It made her unbelievably touchable and he’d had to. He’d had to touch her again.

So he did; he’d touched her face, tracing invisible paths and adoring how supple her skin was. Wondered what it would feel like to nuzzle against her cheeks. Her cheeks and her chin. her Nothing was ignored in his perusal… it was all soft, strong skin. Skin that made his own tingle and tighten.

Where his fingers had touched and smoothed and stroked, a trail of a pinkish bloom had eventually followed in his wake. Which was how he knew he’d woken her. So lusciously gratifying, that he could instil that kind of reaction in her, it made his heart pound and caused his stomach to contract as the anticipation of her opening her eyes to this - to him touching her - grew.

He’d never wanted to see anyone wake up to him lying next to them before, as much as he did then.

They’d lain there in the quiet and it hadn’t surprised him how much he’d wanted to stay right there. How much he’d wanted to ignore their problems and concerns. And that was how he’d
realised - because if there was something Oliver Queen did very well it was to focus on the
difficulties in his life. And he never, ever traded it for his own happiness. So, it was how he knew.

Heaven exists.

It was just that… his paradise wasn’t waiting for him after death.

It’s right here, in Felicity’s face and her touch. In her presence. It was begging to love him and be
loved in return, because wasn’t that the greatest thing you could ever know on earth? To wholly
love… and be loved just as deeply in return?

It was something Thea once said. Probably got it from a movie.

But then a knock at the door had forced the world outside to be seen and heard. Everything he’d
been feeling had been reflected back at him in her gaze. A gaze that told him she didn’t need more.
She didn’t need him to change because she liked, loved, every part of him. How scary that was.
She’d long since accepted the darker truths of Oliver Queen and had found herself more than
equal to the task of facing them. Of accepting them in ways he never could. With her, he’d tasted
the sun. She was easily the strongest of them all...

And this isn’t the time.

God, he wanted it to be. But he didn’t want to have to stop with words alone, because without the
actions to prove their meaning they were just platitudes.

Taking a breath – he had to if his brain kept reeling off in spirals he shouldn’t be considering – he
caught her doing the same, her mouth still forming ‘oh.’ It wasn’t a word, but it might as well have
been coming from her: sentences of meaning in one minute, seamless sound.

Making him think that maybe everything in her had quietened. Was silenced.

By me. His jaw clenchers. Something only I can do.

That possibility, that he was to blame for that, that he could quieten the noise in her mind, that he
could be her solace...

She’d already told him she felt safe with him. He was her safe place. So it wasn’t much of a step to
think that he could bring her peace. It wasn’t something he’d ever given a woman, wasn’t
something he’d granted. So it was hard to imagine. It was impossible... but doing the impossible
had become his and her wheelhouse. It felt right.

Like an ‘Us’.

Us.

Something else he’d never experienced.

She was giving him everything. How could she not see that she was that ‘everything’?

He cleared his throat, eyes flickering to and from her as she stood on the other side of the library
table, suddenly uncomfortable at all the words crammed in his chest.

But her eyes were bright. She didn’t move, she just continued to look at him.

Looking at me like that is dangerous for her.
Then she whispered, “You’re blushing.” A small smile began to bloom on her face. And he was; heat spreading down his throat, mimicking all the things he kept quiet. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you blush before.”

Surprised, a husky laugh escaped him and he knew how he looked. That his eyes were lighter than they’d been in years because he could feel it; her influence under his skin. Smile, wide – he couldn’t help it, the more he looked at her – he shook his head at her. I can’t answer that. There was no way he could produce words right now. Not with the emotions he’d bottled up bubbling in his throat.

Not with how she took his breath away with the look in those brilliant eyes of hers. “What were you thinking about?”

Letting out a shaky exhale, he sucked in a deeper breath but didn’t stop staring into her. Couldn’t. His smile faltered but it wasn’t due to some sudden unhappiness. It was that ache he felt for her, the lull of a need that throbbed through his core making him take her question seriously. He briefly closed his eyes and when they opened again, it was all there for her to see. Every single thing he’d been thinking and feeling in the past few minutes, in the past couple of days, in the past year written in his eyes.

Though love was a definite factor, lust was the primary flare that caught her. His darkened gaze speaking of devotion, the way his brow begged her not to travel down a road he couldn’t attempt right then and there...

A shuddering breath lifting her chest, her mouth open and soft - pliant – her eyelids fluttered away and he caught her swallow. When her eyes replied in kind, he felt like he’d been hit with a sledge hammer.

She didn’t blink or look away.


Standing there, mouth open, he almost stumbled on air.

Fuck. Me.

He’d had no clue that Felicity could look at him like that. That any woman could look at him like that. That any woman could want him – me – as much as she obviously did right then.

Like she could eat him whole but she’d be the one begging for more at the end. Like she wanted him to go to her, right then and there, tear off her panties and make her moan the way he wanted her to moan. Like she was offering to keep him warm, keep him sated, make him whole. Like she was giving him permission to not be a gentleman - it was easy because she knew he was - all the while understanding that now wasn’t the time.

All this had only started because she’d been cleaning that crossbow, because she’d explained to him how she’d been practicing in private simply because she’d wanted to connect to him and maybe prove to herself she could.

For a few seconds he completely forgot what he was supposed to say. Brain blown.

Yes, it was a good thing that there were people in the room next door. It stopped him from acting on the very real need to kiss the life out of her, to take her away and be with her.

But then we’d never come up for air.
Not that this was a bad thing…

A giggle escaped from her, breaking through the tension, probably at how serious their tension was and he chuckled too, awkwardly. A hand lifted to the back of his neck in the hopes of wiping away even a small trace of the desire he felt. It wasn’t dry there.

Damn, he was sweating.

“Oliver.”

It was automatic, how his eyes closed. Oliver.

Then they opened again and he knew his expression was beyond affection at this point. “Hm?”

“If you can’t get through to me, call my name.”

The words made zero sense… until they didn’t.

A slow frown started to furrow on his forehead because, not happening: we are not having this conversation. Even if it was smart. “Felicity…”

She smiled at him and the confidence there made the apprehension in his back seep away as quickly as it had come. “Oliver, I’m going to be fine. But if something sets me off, I need you to come to me.” Her words were quiet, a whisper of a touch on his skin. “Come to me and say my name. Get my attention.”

Taking in a deep breath he nodded, wishing he could make this better when she spoke again, in a murmur.

“If it’s you I think I’ll hear it. If it’s you.”

It almost broke him, not touching her then. “If it’s you asking.” The words were hoarse and he’d wobbled slightly in the middle, but that didn’t subtract from how much he meant them.

A promise. An eternal vow. And she couldn’t deny it because, thinking back, he’d done everything she’d ever asked of him – and she hadn’t asked a lot.

“Felicity Smoak.”

It was a murmur, like she’d murmured to him.

And… It reached her. She stopped.

Of course she did. He’d asked, so she did. If he’d had any reservations about being right - that her feelings were on par with his - they were obliterated on the spot.

He’d seen it in Roy. In Slade. Neither had backed off when he’d asked them to. It had been Shado, the reminder of her, which had gotten through to Slade. It was the reminder of Thea that brought Roy back to them.

It was his voice, his presence, which allowed Felicity to return to him.

Between movements, her arm - holding the sword - slightly raised and bent and her legs apart, her frozen form made her look like a sculpture come to life.

Nyssa doubled back, standing off at the side. Waiting. Watching. The satin soft material of her
mask now in tatters on the floor. Sara… didn’t move at all. Her hands gripped her weapon so tightly he could hear her leather gloves give way but she didn’t move a muscle. And Laurel made to stand, keeping quiet, eyes flickering from one person to the other.

His attention was caught elsewhere…

To the loose pieces of Felicity’s hair that brushed against her face when her head moved.

Blue, blue eyes finally flashed to his. They were cleared fully of the blank aggression he’d seen there before. They were wet, glittering, and he knew it was with the anguish she was feeling - probably so strongly she was choking on it - at her lack of control. They sang stories, those eyes. Poignant in their emotions…

Gentling as they naturally displayed that she loves him.

*God, Felicity.*

He slowly lowered his bow - done in by everything that was her and glorying in that fact - and her mouth opened as he did, a small clogged breath releasing words that hurt to hear. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry Oliver; I hurt Laurel.”

She looked heartbroken. Like it meant something more that she’d touched Laurel and not someone else. Like she’d passed a line. Like she thought he’d be devastated by it.

She took a deeper breath: it sounded like she had asthma. “I just… I didn’t-”

Sara cut in, emotionless. “You had her by the throat. And you didn’t let her go.”

Bow in one hand, Oliver - who didn’t look away from Felicity - saw her eyes close, saw her nod and press her lips together.

Like she was waiting for scorn.

His hands tightened, jaw clenching and if he’d loved Felicity any less, he’d have rounded on Sara. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. Felicity was right there and she came first. Always.

It didn’t matter that half of the women he’d slept with in the past two years were in the same room; it didn’t mean he had to do shit. They didn’t compare. What he’d had with them didn’t come close. Not to this.

So… yes. He was done with listening to voices from the past. Done letting doubts from others cloud his judgement.

Not once did his eyes leave her, from where she stood all bold and bright… and judged.

*Enough.* He moved then, striding purposefully towards her. *Enough now honey.*

Tunnel vision; call it what you will but she was all he could see. Her eyes flew open when she heard his bow clatter to the floor - none of that mattered without her anyway, not the bow that she’d created, not the suit that she’d mended countless times, none of it - and they widened at the intention she saw in his own.

As he absently yanked the gloves from his hands, dropping them on the floor too, he left her no time to process it, left her no room to react.

Like he was being drawn, his hands came up and before he knew it he was there.
As if he’d done it 1000 times and would continue for more than 1000 more, his palms cupped her cheeks, fingers tracing strands of hair - she felt so small in his hands, she fit perfectly. His eyes fixed on hers, watching the slew of emotions appear and disappear one after the other, partial to how they briefly fluttered closed at his touch and he understood this, that need - took it in his stride - because yes, it was a lot to feel. He was right there with her.

*I’m here. You’re safe.*

Heart hammering - because this time his instincts were in control and it was so different to before – it rang in his ears, cancelling out any other sound but the ones she might make.

There was nothing to think about, nothing to discuss. No thoughts in his head of anything other than them. Just them two.

It was an instinctive fall, his face closing in on hers. No pause this time, no slight hesitation hinging from him, waiting for her to come to him. She needed to feel this. And he didn’t care who was watching, who was there; they didn’t reach his notice, not now. Not here.

Pulling her in, his warm lips found her cool ones. A hard press, taking her shaky gasp into himself and every part of his body honed in on that like a shark. The heat of her mouth reached south, down to deeper muscles and nested there. Building.

It wasn’t sweet, wasn’t a gentle expression.

It was hunger. Undeniable. Honest; *for once, honest.*

It was a dream...her closed eyes, the dark lashes on her skin. *Her.* It was truth. It was love. It was sex and every golden, hopeful promise. It was his soul connecting to hers, saying words that couldn’t be spoken.

It was Oliver and Felicity.

It was…

*Magic.*

That’s what he felt. Magic. Like coming home.

*I’m home.*

Body against every single inch of her - revelling in that intimacy; how he was hers and was submitting to it just as he was claiming - She was so soft in comparison to his hard lines. His head slanted, fingers fully sliding into her hair as she opened up under him, skin tingling as her mouth sucked in his top lip…

Felt her fingers touch his wrists. Felt her push upwards into the kiss. Felt her chest expand, as if she were fighting to breathe him in deep… like he’d imagined she’d want to only better.

*Felicity.*

His tongue slid inside just as his eyes squeezed shut.
She’d heard him.

She always would.

“FELICITY!”

She’d heard him that first time; control of her mind came back faster than her body. It’s me, so, yeah. So it inevitably took a while for her to stop fighting.

But it was supremely more difficult to handle when Nyssa stabbed her through her thigh.

“Fel-i-city.”

Yet that had done it. It broke through. Broke through the veil of anger and cold calculus that wasn’t her, not at all.

“Felicity Smoak.”

I love how he says my name. Like it was the answer to all his questions, his prayers. Maybe it was completely ridiculous to think such things but… with the way he’d looked at her too…

So dark in the factory, his eyes had appeared a very dark green. It gave him gravitas and she decided she liked it. Liked knowing that on dark nights, liked it in places darker than this, in the cesspools of society where real; evil roams and they look upon the Arrow... and gulp.

And she liked it even more when those eyes were on her own.

It was as if she’d been lost and he’d found her.

Maybe it was the shadow of his hood covering his face but, they’d gleamed. He hadn’t once blinked; his face a strict example of control if there ever was one because what he looked like he wanted to do wasn’t for polite company.

Then the big red stop sign hit her: she remembered what she’d done and who she’d done it to. Laurel. I hurt Laurel. I beat down Isabel and, yes, she’s a raging bitch machine but no one deserves to have their face creamed in. Apologising had felt trite – it wasn’t enough – and Sara’s icy reply...

Then, of course, Oliver did exactly what he wanted to do. Shockingly. Thoroughly.

Which led her to right now… the unthinkable. It should be capitalised. That the absurd became the only possible road to travel on.

She’d felt so discombobulated, so overdrawn and guilty and she hadn’t felt like herself. Yet now…

Now she felt like herself. Now she couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe - didn’t want to, what use was air - or speak. Stunned senseless.

He’d gone to her, ignoring the others - he didn’t even look at Laurel or Sara and that boggled her even more than she was already seriously boggled - and touched her like she was priceless.

Oliver.

She felt it everywhere, his kiss.
His kiss. Again, he’d kissed her. And he wasn’t short on technique, wasn’t lacking affection… making love to her mouth.

He wouldn’t have kissed me if he was upset with me for Laurel… Right?

He couldn’t be… not when the feel of him touched her toes. Not when he lit up a current along her spine before shooting through each nerve in her body. Fingers of warmth trailing down into her chest, into her heart and staying there.

She’d thought about how it would be. Countless times, she’d wondered. And dreamed, whilst denying to herself that it never would. When he’d kissed her hours before, it had fulfilled every fantasy. But this…

It was blinding.

Until something inside her reacted. It was primal, that response. It was the part of her she’d buried since ‘I’m not going to hurt you Felicity’ and ‘Thank you’.

There’d been a lot to fill that tank this year.

Feeling him, his essence reaching inside her, he dug deep; hitting that spot, the place where he lived. Marking himself there on her soul; he made himself a home.

That was it. Thank God. There was no return. Finally.

It was communicated from his skin and into hers. This was what he wanted, all he wanted and for once, he was taking it and making it theirs.

She’d have laughed, cried, if her attention wasn’t so taken elsewhere.

Floating.

Soft, his lips really were incredible. Processing how perfectly they fit against her fuller set was impossible.

Initially, it was hard, unbreakable. But it was still a caress, still a worship of mouths and hearts and hands.

There was too much to feel and her eyes closed fast because of it. Too much to comprehend.

And her hands moved without her telling them to; her arms lifting, unknowing of their destination until her fingers touched his wrists. Until her hands gripped them.

As if they didn’t know where to go first – because all of it, everything, felt so good – her fingers linked between his own on her face before sliding back over his skin as she moved with him. One trailed down his arm – cool leather under hand – until it touched the skin of his neck.

I like it there… At his neck.

The thumbs on her cheeks tightened, his fingers digging firmly into her scalp, holding her closer. Keeping her with him. Like he couldn’t get enough, like he needed deeper, harder, hotter. More.

That was completely fine. So did she. Like a wave, she felt that.

Pushing up on her toes, her mouth pressed so roughly into his, their teeth clashed; both of them opening up in a shock of gasps and jumping pulses. Desire made physical, making them jolt.
Nose bumping against his own, her exhale landed heavily on his skin. Lips sucking in one of his, her tongue lapped at the light sweat gathered there after hours of fighting. Loving his taste, knowing that she would. Feeling his hands tremble - his diaphragm expanding into her stomach, love that too - as her fingers scraped over the scruff of his jaw, something she’d wanted to do since the very beginning and the gritty sound moved though her like a pulse.

His head twisted, slanting his mouth firmly over hers - another amazing reminder of his strength and size - as his forearms curved over her shoulders, fitting her into him.

It was natural – kismet – how she opened for him again.

Then feel of his hot, wet, tongue searching her mouth and sliding over her own, made her melt.

Made her moan, made lights flash behind her eyes. It’s been a while and this is Oliver. Made something deep inside her echo take me and mine.

Made his mouth open further to shudder a sound into hers, one that came from his chest, one low and quiet and real – like he honestly couldn’t help it – and it buzzed through her skin before he was taking her breath away again. Body folding around hers, a hand dropped from her scalp to wrap fast down past her bunching shoulders. Pressing. Securing.

Just as she melted, she leaned into him in kind; her hips against his hips, her thighs against his thighs, her chest against his chest… the hand on his jaw moving to his ear and further still, until her fingers were slipping into the short hair at the top of his spine. Until her other arm rounded his head.

They couldn’t get closer if they tried.

And they did; they tried.

Rougher now, the kiss deepened…and that’s when she really felt it. She felt them. Felt what they were, what they could be, what they were becoming. God, this is how we kiss. She’d hoped it would be this good, this dizzying, this distracting.

More.

Like he was caught in a fever, the hand in her hair fisted in her locks - her bobble had fallen to the floor long ago - and the other tugged her closer, his hand twisting in her jumper.

It was like a spasm, the pleasure she felt form that. From his hands and his leg that pushed between her own. Grasping his head in her arm and hands she began kissing him so forcefully that her lips stretched enough to hurt. He responded, fast, with a guttural kind of grunt.

Stop. Stop Felicity.

Once, twice, she kissed him again, strongly – each one a loud smack – before taking a haggard breath against his lips, eyes still closed and it took everything in her not to move back in.

She felt it in her system. Mirakuru. And for some reason, kissing Oliver lit it up. I could hurt him. I could... hurt Oliver. Through a kiss.

And he gave her that, gave her breathing room.

But he didn’t give her space.
Her eyes rolled back into her head at the rasp of his beard on her skin, at the feeling of his nose grazing her cheek, inhaling her scent. His lips sucked down the line of her jaw to her ear, nipping there, hearing him pant as his teeth pulled at the arrowhead-bar before he was quickly taking her mouth again.

*This* kiss was slow. Much slower. Like a rolling drum.

Royally sucking in her lower lip, his head bent over her so that she had to tip hers back. Slipping her arms down through his to cover his back, her fingers clung to the leather and she felt his heart thunder beneath her touch. There was an almost imperceptible quiver that went through him at how much he was visibly putting into this, into how much she was giving him back. Leaving her imprinted; on him and inside him.

The kiss ended without actually ending. And that was how a good kiss should be really.

A second smooch closed in on the end of it – and it *was* a smooch.

There was a light lapping sound that was slightly wet and should have been gross to hear but *really* wasn’t as he tasted her tongue again - just the tip - but his real aim was to take in her lower lip once more. A third press in the same place followed by a peck, also slow because she was memorising how that felt: the touch of both his lips against both of hers. And he wanted her to feel it, so he stayed right where he was, until she was done. Though she never would be would she? She’d never be well and truly done with him...

Lips parting, he didn’t pull back. They didn’t break. Didn’t move away, and she didn’t know what she would have done if he had. Their eyes remained closed and they were still so tightly wrapped around the other; the chemistry between them a physical hum.

It was almost surreal.

Breathing in each other’s breaths, their mouths still touched.

*That was... is a word even available to describe this?*

Unbelievable? Earth moving? Ground shifting and sky bending? Life changing? Heart shattering?

You read about this kind of thing: you don’t experience it. It wasn’t supposed to be *real*.

*He’s ruined me.* She couldn’t bring herself to be even a little annoyed by that.

Eventually Oliver exhaled. It was *ragged*.

*Guh.*

*Words Felicity, use words...*

But she was so overcome... and he was so enticing.

She didn’t know what to do or what to say but her tongue immediately licked at the air - as if she could taste his breath - and the tip touched his lips again. A little moan escaped him - his hand revisiting her hair, pressing her closer to him, *didn’t think that was possible at this point* - and she gulped when he shuddered into her.

Then the panic kicked in - such a mood killer - as she guessed that if she lost herself in him once more, she’d lose her tenuous grip on her strength. *I don’t want to hurt him.*
She needed to see if all was well in Oliver Land. She needed him to form words and tell her truths... but he seemed as helplessly mute as she and it wasn’t helping that she was super wonderful with the whole thing.

*Focus.* Trying to speak, *I really am*, she utterly failed. *Come on.* Nope, not happening... because she could smell him.

*Do you know just how good Oliver Queen smells?* *Come rain or shine, through sweat and blood, against tears and weird environmental or chemical and substances, he smells divine. Purely an Oliver scent. Like a pheromone.*

So the words wouldn’t form.

But all thoughts ceased being created in her mind when she felt the feather light touch of his forehead to hers. It was automatic, how she stopped breathing. It should have been terrifying to her for a man or anyone really, to have as much influence over her but obviously she was screwed because, *man*, she just wanted more. All of it. Everything.

His nose brushing down her cheek made her try to focus on him; he was so close his eyes were the only things she could discern, so close that she see the grey flecks on the blue of his iris.

And what those eyes told her... it was unfathomable. Like he loved everything he could see in her. Like he’d taken a dip in the not so deep pool that was Felicity Smoak subconscious and was revelling in what he’d discovered. Pupils blown in the dim light, breathing heavy he looked into her and didn’t stop. Didn’t move.

But he did speak.

“You never have to apologise to me.” Raw. His modulator wasn’t switched on but the reservoir of feeling he was obviously experiencing - and the fact that Oliver Queen was 1000% Alpha male - made his tone, his voice, a jagged vibration. “Not ever.”

It hit a very female part of her and her lashes fluttered. *Boy.*

Yep; she was screwed.

The love in his voice...like a vow.

And... he’d just let her off the hook. *But, Laurel... Sara.*

She licked her lips, trying to shake her head. *He shouldn’t do that.* “But I-”

“Not your fault.” He whispered and it sounded so kind. “I know you.” His eyes flickered over her face. “Not your fault.”

Taking him in, it was almost too much to hope for that to be true. But she could tell; he believed it. He believed in her the way she believed in him; he must, otherwise he’d have never asked her to inject the cure into Slade Wilson should she be given the chance. He’d never been able to be anything other than honest with her.

And yet...

“I hurt her.” *Laurel.* She could think the name a thousand times and the image of Oliver pining...
after said woman the year before, seeking her in Verdant and watching her when she was with Tommy. “You’re Laurel.” As she always would be. Her mouth moved but zero sound escaped.

But he read her lips and something rippled over his brow.

He disagreed.

“You were protecting yourself.” Gaze boring into hers, he shook his head; a small frown emphasising his next words, words spoken so quietly only she could hear them. “And Laurel was never mine.” The frown left as swiftly as it had come, only to be replaced by tenderness. “I was never hers.”

And, oh, when he said it like that - like it was a given that he’d always get her, get me, get Felicity – it made her want to fall into him and never come up for air.

*Deep breaths, Felicity.*

He arched a brow at her silence and murmured. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered softly, tiny bit besieged because he was looking at her like that and she was only human, before tentatively asking, “What about you?”

He mouthed, “What?”

“Did I…” *This is really embarrassing.* “Just now, when we were… did I, er…” *How am I supposed to word this?* “I’m really strong now.” She floundered but he just waited for her, *wow.* “And I don’t want to ever hurt you, for any reason…”

She was just making it worse, but thankfully Oliver spoke fluent *Felicity.*

“No.” The look in his eyes was so sweet, so absolute in his need for her to see that she’d done nothing to reproach herself for. *Oliver. Sweet.* “You didn’t.” He muttered, more into her than as actual words and voice. She *felt* them, his breath warm. “I’m… *perfect.*”

Perfect.

*I didn’t hurt him.*

And he was. Perfect. He really was.

Eyes searching his, her relief made her try for a smile and it was nervous, hesitant. “Yeah?”

Feeling his Adam’s apple shift - a swallow - he pulled back. *Like, an inch.*

“Yes.”

And he just gazed at her; like it was all he could do.

Loose lips sink ships and hers just couldn’t be stopped because he was tall, he was in green leather and he was Oliver. What’s a girl to do? “I *knew* you’d be a good kissier.” She breathed, like, she should have realised he’d be so well versed and she was an idiot for not knowing it before hand.

*Oh god.*

Something flashed through him then – a shock of something free and easy and simple – and a breathy sound escaped him. There was humour in it.
All embarrassment fled because maybe he liked her quirk for babbling. “You’ve definitely kissed a lot of people.” She backtracked. “But you’ve, ah,” she took a breath, her smile more her, more I love you; “you’ve kind of ruined me. For other guys.”

And she told him with her eyes that she did, that she loved him. She hadn’t said the words but he knew her. Down to her soul, he knew her. Knew that here, in his arms, she felt safe. Knew that even though she was in his arms, it was like a dream. That he’d need to hold her often so that she’d eventually believe it a reality.

In the past year, their small talks and touches, their glances and actions had told her he’d be able to out manoeuvre her on any day. But he never would.

So he could see it; as if written in her eyes he could see everything…

He trembled. Just a little, right after she’d spoken. And he looked so open to her right then, more open than ever before. A little fragile and a lot hopeful.

Slowly, his hand left her hair, bringing it forward to hold her cheek. He exhaled through his nose and his chest pushed into hers on his next deep inhale.

Blue, not grey blue or green blue but blue - the bluest of blues - stared into her; all tender, gooey and dark.

Sexy.

“Good.”

Throaty.

Damn it.

Then he smiled… and she knew this was it. This was forever.

Because as easy natured as it was, as warm as it was, it was also hers. Oliver – in general – wasn’t an easy going man. Not at all. She’d never seen him look at anyone else the way he was looking at her right now. And, sure, she hadn’t been with him 100% of the time but… with each of his soft blinks - like he was making snapshots of her and saving them in his brain - that sweet smile on his face that made her want to, weirdly, pinch his cheeks - became so gentle and so affectionate, it touched her somewhere deep inside.

And it asked questions that smile:

Is this okay? Can I do this with you now? I’ve wanted to, for so long. Can I belong to you? Can I ask you never to look at another the way you’re looking at me right now? Can I be happy that I’ve ruined you for other guys? I believe in you so can I believe in this too?

How was she supposed to stop groping him now?

His proximity shook her to the core and she shivered; her exhale shaky and softest of sounds left him; light and incurable.

Yes. Everything was going to be fine. Everything would be alright now. She was back and Oliver was here with her.

Licking her lips - his eyes dropped immediately to them and she didn’t know blue could flare but
they really could because his *did* - a laugh, that was more a disbelieving gasp than anything else, quietly came from her.

Because this was actually happening to them.

She drank him in. “Hi.”

Lips twitching, his arms lightly squeezed her. “Hi.”

Being this close, there was nothing to be said: on the receiving end of his kisses, his soft words, killer touches and tender stares, there was literally nothing she could do or say against it, against what she read on his face.

As if he knew - of course he did - he took in another deep breath, not breaking eye contact. “You feel good.”

She stared.

He nodded to himself, the gap between his eyes creasing with soulful sentiment, “you feel *really* good.”

Swallowing - his eyes were flickering all over her now and there was something in that - her mouth opened to say words again but-

“I’ve wanted to do that for a while.” His voice husky, he took his time with the rest. “I knew it would be incredible. But I didn’t think you’d feel this good.” Pressing his lips together, he shook his head… and there was something oddly sad about it. She started to frown but then he spoke again. “I didn’t know it *could* feel this good.”

*Oh.* “Oliver.” It was a quiet groan, a ‘*you’re killing me*’, one that obviously reached him…

She felt his finger stroke gently under her chin, felt his knuckles there. She caught another smile, a small one. But his face, everything about him, *shined* with it.

*Wow.*

Would there ever be a point where he stopped being wonderful? They’d only just begun and his more than usual tenderness was hitting her, square in the gut.

His nose nudged hers - once, twice - playfully and a sound escaped her that she could only describe as a giggle. *My former Goth-self would be horrified.*

But he was stunning; she could look into his eyes all day and never want to stop.

Which was why she witnessed as they started to do this *thing*, his eyes. This breathless little quiver as a *light* flew into them, the kind she’d never seen in there before, the kind Felicity figured he hadn’t known he could generate because he blinked with it too; an actual flutter of lashes.

It was faith. It was anticipation. Optimism.

He looked… happy. *Ridiculously* happy. *He’s happy.*

And though she’d love to lay its cause all over their kiss; a kiss was just a kiss, an earth shattering kiss, but it was a kiss nonetheless.

No, he was simply happy. Just that.
He was holding his world in the palm of his hands.

How… how could Laurel have spent so much time pushing him away, throwing bitterness and regret in his direction when this could have been hers? How could Sara not want to even try working with him towards a common goal? How could Helena think of leaving him, even for a night, to wreck revenge when this stunning man was waiting for her to see the light?

Flawed relationships they may have been - on both sides of that coin - but still...how?

If she hadn’t realised it before - and I did because I’m not an idiot - she’d have figured it out then that she’d just hit the jackpot.

Whatever he saw in her face made his smile grow, revealing teeth, making him look like he never wanted to come up for air, which was exactly what she was saying to him with every facet of her being. She felt so comfortable being where she was, in his arms.

Haltingly - she could do this now, right, because she’d dreamed of touching him when he was wearing his leather suit - her hands straightened his hood; she’d pulled it off his head between kisses. She checked his expression before she pushed up off the floor again, wanting to be as close as possible. Needing to connect again.

Gaze warm - a big fat ‘yes please’ - he bent his head, his thigh muscles tightening to brace them both - she loved the feel of that too - as he made to touch her mouth with his. “Felicity-”

“-Exactly like that. Like I’m listening to the replay.”

Who’s voice it was didn’t fully register but Felicity jolted in his hands. Hands that didn’t leave her.

Wait...

Realisation dawned on her. Frack. They’d both completely forgotten they had an audience, all with their own grudges to bear. Except maybe Nyssa, who seemed to only be there for the fun of it. Yet...

Oopsie.

Oliver’s eyes slid shut.

Biting down on her lip, her teeth grazed his mouth and his eyes came back to hers. But a jagged furrow started to grow on his brow, marring the peace she’d been waiting close to 2 years to continue seeing after only five minutes of basking in it. And it hurt that it was so short lived. Give the man a break.

They probably could have handled it better though: making out like star-crossed lovers. But she’d been panicking and hating herself for any prior damage done on her part and he’d been... he’d been Oliver. He’d been trying to make her feel better with something that made sense to him.

And he was in love with her.

Ergo; kiss of the century.

Now that her face was further from his - great, moment gone, I’ll really miss you - she could see that his was slightly pinkish. Like he’d been blushing. Or flushed. Heated.

Huh...well that’s super nice, mm hm. It was nice, not being the only one who lights up like a
Christmas tree.

Plus his mouth looked red too and kind of... swollen. *I take 100% of the credit... yum.*

It took everything in her not to grin like a maniac.

Watching those lips press together – and they were very nice lips – Oliver lifted his head, thumb carelessly brushing her cheek, glancing away.

Apologetic.

*Oliver.* She watched him sigh. Like sand slipping through her fingers, there went the beatific expression that had been there just now on his even more beautiful face. Wearing thin until it disappeared entirely. Weary impatience replaced it. He looked frustrated. But not with her.

“It’s disgusting, but then you’re *you.* Right, Oliver? You just couldn’t help yourself.”

*What?*

Isabel?

The words confused her.

Both puzzled, they turned together, his hands refusing to let her go. And that absently soothed something inside her she hadn’t realised needed soothing. In front of Laurel Lance, his first love. In front of Sara, his kindred spirit. In front of Isabel, his beautiful lay.

His hands. Didn’t. Leave. Her.

All those times she’d seen him with other women, that wound had widened. It had been utterly unintentional; she was a smart cookie and would never ever allow herself become such a hopeless romantic that she’d deliberately wait for a man - regardless of whether or not she loved him - who didn’t and would never, return her affections.

But he did, he *does.*

And, if she was right - if everything he was telling her in his words and actions was correct - he had done so for quite some time.

It threw his ‘*I can’t be with something that I could really care about*’ speech into a new perspective.

So now, seeing the heavy set of his jaw, the very clear disinclination in his eyes - that he had to now let the world back in - and feeling the way his hands were unwilling to leave her, that she couldn’t recall him ever having touched Sara like this in the Foundry - openly affectionate - made the wound feel like a speck of dust in the wind.

*Heaven is a place on earth.*

There was so much they still needed to do, so much they still needed to-

“Was that the only time you said her name?”

The words, stressed, were sort of overdone and something about them…

Looking behind her - a hand fell from her face but the other tread gently to her neck - Felicity
caught sight of Isabel Rochev, still resting against the pipes in the corner; blood mattered on her face and in her hair - I think I ripped her mask off - but otherwise, completely healed.

*Good.*

But her stomach dropped at the look on her face; the sneer, the superiority… she hadn’t finished, not by a long shot. But it appeared she at least subconsciously understood when she was physically beaten because she didn’t rise. Didn’t make to retrieve her swords. Didn’t move a muscle.

She just smirked. At Oliver.

“What are you talking about?” As if he was very much in line with never speaking to this woman again, with good cause, as if turning towards the occupants of the room was analogous to a physical pain and as if every word out of his mouth was a hardship - like crawling over broken glass - Oliver sounded… done.

But then Isabel’s words surfaced in her head and… *Oh, god.*

She wouldn’t. She couldn’t.

*Crap on a cracker.*

This was *Isabel* and Isabel absolutely *would.*

Felicity attempted an intervention because the new shine in Isabel’s eyes was borderline ‘the Omen’ evil. “I think that-”

“That’s how you said her name.” Isabel reiterated, sending a quick glance of gleeful hatred in Felicity’s direction. *Geez, what did I do to you in a past life?* But she knew really; *heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor Nell a fury like a woman scorned.* Isabel had been rejected - royally - by the best of them; the original Queen Player, Robert Queen.

She wasn’t above taking it out on the Queen heirs; a man she loathed because he reminded her of his father and his sister who she blamed for taking Robert away from her when she broke her leg as a child.

“Wasn’t it?” Her eyes back on Oliver’s, Isabel made of a show of looking *oh so innocent.* “Wasn’t that exactly like how you said it? Do you remember?”

It took a moment, a moment of silence as Oliver frowned at the psychotic mess of a CEO, a moment where Felicity held her breath as her eyes flashed towards an unmoveable Sara and an equally imposing Nyssa. *Why were they just standing there?*

*Why am I just standing here?*

Confused, Oliver bit out. “Russia?”

Then Isabel said the magic words, with a smile so horribly wide it made her attractive face look ugly.

“Russia.” She emphasised; a curl of the tongue over the word that made Felicity shiver and not in delight. “That night in your hotel room.” He blinked and Isabel went right for it. “During - when you came.”

Oliver stilled.
Just in case he still didn’t get it, Isabel saw fit to educate him some more.

“You said Felicity.” She close-to hissed.

The expression on his face… like a plank of wood had hit him over the head. And the sudden slope of his brow… guilt. He knew. He’d always known.

And Felicity couldn’t bring herself to concentrate on that, not a bit. Heart dropping like a stone into her stomach, she had no clue what to do about this. Her eyes flickered everywhere, a flush of something sweeping through her and she wasn’t sure if it was supreme awkward discomfort at being so very put on display, embarrassment - for Oliver - or a clotting sore of something she truly wished she didn’t feel right then. Or ever.

Jealousy.

It wasn’t exactly a burning fire of green animosity; it was more a general lukewarm resignation, stemming from an overabundance of acknowledgement of the many women Oliver Queen had slept with prior to this moment.

With none of them being her.

No, she would never allow herself to be a quick fling in a foreign country. And she wouldn’t allow herself to enter into a relationship that was based primarily on a mere past connection, on hiding from loneliness (because she’d rather be alone, by herself, than alone in a crowd). Never would she ever, deny herself the pleasure of loving a man because bitterness was a more enticing bed friend.

So, maybe it was a mute point.

That didn’t mean she didn’t feel it though. And she’d never wanted to, because the respect she held for their friendship alone wasn’t worth feeling that sting every time she was reminded of her unrequited feelings, feelings that had started almost immediately.

Not that she’d known immediately.

Seeing Oliver unconscious and bleeding on the table in the Foundry after his mother shot him… then she’d known. Like it had been forced down her throat. She’d faced it. She’d accepted it. And she’d promised never to a) bring it up and b) tell Oliver.

Since… it was unthinkable, right? Me and Oliver.

Except, now she knew it wasn’t.

So the jealousy was even more ridiculous-

**Three of the four women surrounding you have sampled the man you’ve made it your life’s mission to keep alive**

*Slade? He hadn’t uttered a peep; not since Nyssa shot an arrow into her. Okay, sample? That’s so wrong. On so many levels.*

**But true**

Right.

**Pay attention; the way he is with you, the way he looks at you, holds you; I know Oliver**
...Okay.

The way he just kissed you, he did it to make you feel safe in your own skin

*Not that talking of kisses with you is creepy or anything, BTW it totally is-*

Your jealousy stems simply from the fact that you haven’t had the honour of holding your beloved in every intimate way imaginable

*You’re being very forward about this and I’ve got to tell you it’s weird.*

I want Oliver to be as happy as I would have been if Shado had never died; he can only be that way with you

That was… yep; she was floored.

*How can you be so sure?*

I’ve seen enough; from behind your eyes and from behind my own when I was more myself than a divide

It helped, sort of. It helped the slightly sick burn reduce to a small stomach clench.

But it also made her remember Russia.

*Why her?*

She’d asked him that.

*Why a quick screw? Why not a loving relationship? Why with the woman who’s trying to destroy your company? Why with a woman I know you don’t even like?*

...*Why not come to me?*

That was the worst part; that part of her, a small part, had wondered why - since she’d been in the building with him - he hadn’t gone to her.

Of course; their friendship was crucial to him. It really was. He’d emphasised that point and that meant something to her because she valued their friendship too.

But then he’d killed the Count.

And his behaviour with Barry.

Their increased closeness and his affirmation that he needed her with him.

Then *Sara.*

*After I can’t be with something that I could really care about* that had… hurt. Just a tad. Because he obviously *could* be with something he could really care about.

Except, now - knowing him in a way she’d never imagined she could - she realised that, to Oliver, really caring about someone meant knowing he could lose them but going for it anyway. It meant being honest with her, it meant telling her he loves her. It meant being absolutely unable to tolerate anything happening to her.
It meant being unable to live without her, because he’d given her his heart.

Oliver had given her his heart. He may have held her face in his hands but it had been his way of saying ‘I’m yours’.

What else could she do but give it right back?

*Pay attention.*

Pulled away from her head - she hadn’t even realised she’d slipped away - the first thing her eyes immediately took in was the hard smile on Isabel’s face. It was aimed at her side. To Oliver. At-

He wasn’t touching her.

Widening eyes went to him and… he’d backed away too. But he was still looking at her. *Really* looking. And what she saw in his gaze said everything. And it wounded her.

Because he looked *broken*.

Like a few nights prior, when Slade had tried to kill his family. When Oliver had *begged*.

As if a mirror had been smashed to pieces, as if a dream he’d been holding onto lay dead at his feet. As if in a single second, he’d lost the right to touch her.

As if he was expecting, absolutely expecting her to be disgusted with him. Like he was waiting for her to snap; to judge and verbally attack him. And he’d take it, every inch, every lash; all of it. Whether he deserved it or not.

It cut her deep, right through the bone.

*Please don’t do that.*

Knowing that if she tried to move she’d fall - she couldn’t feel her limbs, he’d taken the feeling right out if her with a single look - she took in a breath.

*I could’ve handled that better too.* Her brief stint to the twilight zone. Mentally leaving him by himself wasn’t exactly the right thing to do at this moment. By the expression on his face, he’d taken her silence - her complete blackout - in a very *wrong way*.

He’d taken it as her being too shocked to react, as her being repelled.

Her eyes travelled over his face, heart racing as she tried to pick words, *any* words, with which to assure him that it wasn’t an ugly confession to hear. It wasn’t something to be ashamed of.

It was beautiful.

Yes, it would have been the very worst thing a man could have said to a woman. During sex. Definitely to women like Isabel.

Like Sara.

But… he’d said *her* name.

Had he whispered it? Had he shouted her name? Murmured it? Or was it hushed, like a secret? Moaned like a sin?
Oliver moaning her name… *I really need to hear that.*

She’d dream it in dreams, asleep or awake, until she did.

But now really wasn’t the time to think about it. Or physically respond to it, like she was dying to.

Slowly, so slowly - and not in a good way, not at all - Oliver swallowed. Chest pushing out on what must have been the most painful inhale of his existence - screw water in the lungs - she caught his lips trying to form a word. One beginning with F.

*My name.*

Yet when his lips moulded to the first syllable he stopped himself, pressing them together.

Like he wasn’t allowed.

She needed to nip that in the butt, pronto, before he suffered from any more misconceptions of her being offended by him-

“Did he do that with you?”

*Oh shut up, right now.*

Jaw clenching, Felicity glanced behind her: Isabel was watching Sara the way a cat would watch a mouse eat cheese.

“Did he say her name too?” It was said with the intent to harm.

And the response she received – even though she’d asked – was not the one she’d expected.

Silently Felicity begged Sara to keep quiet, to verbally nib Isabel’s taunts in the butt: Sara was a lethal looking woman. She could do it.

However...

Standing as still as Felicity had ever seen her, Sara took in a breath and - oddly furtive and not a little shamefaced - she sent a brief glance at Oliver before swallowing and looking to the floor. When Nyssa let out a long, judgemental hiss of air - it sounded like a seething pot of boiling water - it was like a confirmation.

*Frack!*

*Don’t look at him.*

Like she’d been slapped by a wet fish, Isabel appeared out of sorts. “You have got to be kidding me.” She stated it so quietly...

Then the start of a cackle sounded from her throat: she looked like Christmas had come early. “This is just precious.” Conniving humour flushing her features she glanced over to Oliver. “Really? Was it because she’s the only one you hadn’t had and you wanted to score a full house?”

It was like the crack of a whip.

Felicity couldn’t help it then; she looked at Oliver.

And Oliver... looked devastated.
Staring at Sara then glancing to Isabel in a flicker of deeply vulnerable irises, he licked what appeared to suddenly be very dry lips and his face slowly lost its colour. Mouth open. Not breathing.

Words appeared in Felicity’s throat then but before she could say them, Oliver snapped back to Sara.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Low and uneven, his words were almost growled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Why did she let that continue?

...This was important to him.

And suddenly, it was important to Felicity too. Since she could see he was reaching for something, she halted her words - just for a minute.

“How was I supposed to tell you Oliver?” The speed of Sara’s reply concerned Felicity because it told her just how much Sara had actually hated it. Hated that during their most intimate moment, she hadn’t been the one he thought of. I get that. I do. “Afterwards? The first time?”

First time.

He flinched.

Sara’s face, even behind her mask, was the epitome of hurt. “The second?”

Chest heaving, he took a step back as if distance would help. “Jesus.” His hands coming up to roughly drag over his jaw to the back of his neck.

And Felicity couldn’t reach for him, because taken a step away from her too.

“So what, you just,” licking his lips Oliver’s shoulders lifted; he didn’t understand and it screamed from every action he took as he stared at Sara, “didn’t say a word? How many times did I even say...” His eyes flickered to Felicity’s and he looked so appalled at himself, so full of fear... “How many times Sara? How many would it take for you to do me the courtesy of saying something?”

For a moment Sara just looked at him.

Now? This is when we discuss this? It was all down to Isabel. Maybe she was stalling for time or something.

“How could I tell you? You were saying another woman’s name when you were with me.” Sara’s head slowly shook. “How could I tell you that?”

But, as Felicity watched her – even feeling the surmounting sympathy for her situation – she could only think that... it wasn’t enough.

Sara should have said something. It wasn’t about whether she could or couldn’t. She hadn’t; instead she’d allowed herself to live inside a world that had never existed. And in doing so she’d dragged everyone else along for the ride. By force.

It was senseless... but the feelings arising from unmet expectations and emotions unearthed after being buried for years often are.

Obviously, Oliver’s thoughts were on the same wave length as hers. “So, what, this was about
pride?” Whispering, he beseeched her. “That isn’t like you Sara.”

Composure more than a little bent, Sara sighed. “Not pride.” Sara shook her head. “Hope.”

Slowly, the frown on Oliver’s face deepened.

“It was... just about a dream I once had.” Sara continued, directing everything at him. “About you and me. What we could have been.”

It was so odd to see: Sara in all her leather clad glory, being soft. Affecting timidity. Instead of brushing off the moment for a suitable one, a more suitable time, the right time. Which is what she’d normally do.

And Nyssa was watching Sara like a hawk. But, Felicity saw no animosity there, no sadness. It was like Nyssa was simply waiting for Sara to make her point.

And she did.

“I had to take that chance.”

“A chance that had a cost.” Oliver forced out. On ‘cost’ Oliver finally slipped; his eyes found Felicity’s. But what he found there... he swallowed. “It wasn’t yours to take.”

“Oh, didn’t you know? She already knew.” Isabel cut in, gesturing cavalierly in Felicity’s direction. “Didn’t look remotely surprised when I brought it up earlier.”

“Why did you have to?.” I sound like I’ve eaten a living crab. “I didn’t realise just how much that must have hurt you.”

You. The woman who’d sooner gauge his eyes out with a wooden spoon than confess affection, you who would destroy him and his family and yet slept with him the moment the world’s back was turned. You, who loved his father but hated his mother, hated his kids because they came between you and a life with Robert Queen.

It got her Isabel’s full attention... and Oliver’s. He was looking between the two: at Felicity, a massive contrast to how he’d appeared as he’d kissed her, it was like he’d failed somehow. And at Isabel with confused loathing.

Isabel shifted but her expression remained coldly conceited. “Thought you should know why you were going to die. Not that I knew you’d been injected by Mirakuru.”

I sense a hitch. “Slade didn’t tell you he infected me himself?”

Something flickered in Isabel’s eyes but before Felicity caught it, the woman’s mouth snapped shut; any and all emotion on her face silencing.

“He didn’t... did he?”

Yes it was cheeky. Yes she was goading.

But Isabel had brought up a very tender - very none of her or anyone else’s business - subject matter and Felicity was more than willing to give a little back.

“Felicity.”

Oh boy. Oliver.
Turning to him, she saw him tilt his head. “You knew?”

She blinked. Oh God. Should I have told him? After Sara explained that... should I have said something? He might see it as an early-in-the-relationship duplicity.

Pleadingly, Felicity shook her head, even though the answer was... “Yes.” It was quiet, that word. I didn’t want him to find out this way. But she’d never lied to him before. “I found out. Couple of days ago.”

On instinct, her hand came up to straighten glasses that no longer sat there. She missed them, missed the comfort familiar habits could bring.

Face lined with the fear still prevalent, the emotion in Oliver’s voice made him sound like he had a cold. “How?” For a long five seconds, Oliver watched her, his girl, who could only look back and struggle with what she didn’t know how to express. “Who told you?”

Then out of nowhere - for whatever reason - the harsh crease to his brow softened until no trace of it existed. Instead it became such a loving and apologetic gaze that her heart pitter-pattered. “I know why you didn’t tell me.” With hushed words he reached out to her, his hand lifting as if it was a natural reaction for him, even though he was several paces away from her.

Bracing for impact she attempted an explanation. “Er, I ah...” Her eyes closed. 

Epic fail.

But it seemed he had no need of it. And as always his departure from her was tender.

“It’s okay.” She heard him murmur.

Silence...

“Wait... that’s what you talked to her about. Isn’t it?” Flinching, Felicity peeked at him only to see his eyes back on Sara, the hand he’d held out now pointing in Sara’s direction. “The other day? When you took her to the Foundry, you were late coming back.” Leaning on one leg so he could gesture to his ex-girlfriend, Oliver’s eyes narrowed in focus. “That’s what you were telling her.”

Sara... said nothing.

“How dare you.”

Betrayal.

Everything about him screamed betrayal.

This was so much worse than a shout. And Sara wasn’t a fool; she could see it, could feel it. And for the first time, Felicity glimpsed tears in those beautiful eyes of hers.
Like every word out of his mouth hurt to say, Oliver stopped and started. “Did... did you... like it? Rubbing that in her face?”

What? Stunned - absolutely baffled - Felicity watched as Oliver gestured to her even as his eyes flashed over Sara. “Did you explain it in detail too?”

“Ollie...no, I-”

“You don’t tell me something I have a right to know but you do tell Felicity?”

Sara was so, so quiet. “You’re telling me you never heard yourself?”

“I thought I’d imagined it. Once.” The confession was delicately handled; without a raised voice but also without kindness. “I knew I said it with Isabel.”

Wow.

Really?

Then why did he-

“But we weren’t about anything past the moment.” Out of oxygen, he took some, his stare slipping - slamming - into Felicity. “I buried it.” He murmured, like they were alone together and he needed so much for her to understand. “I didn’t think I could have...” he swallowed, “what I wanted. What I’d dreamt about.”

Felicity took a step closer-

“I didn’t know... the extent of what I felt.” God, this was hurting him to say. Each of his words pressed into her chest. “In the past two days, both of you have left me little option but to justify my own feelings.” This he said to Sara and Laurel and she wondered what she’d missed during her brief ‘girl-talk’ with the younger Lance sister. “To say things only Felicity should hear.” Refocusing again on Sara, his voice started to elevate. “If you’d told me, all of it, sooner, maybe none of this would actually be happening. Maybe Felicity would never have been infected with Mirakuru.”

Sara cleared her throat. “I don’t think this is the time-”

“I think it is the time.” Face taught, his words were almost growled. “I think now that we’re all here, it is the perfect time.”

There was a long pause. Then...

“Oliver.” Laurel. Oddly enough, she seemed cautious. Like Oliver had shocked her. “Don’t you think that Sara’s just-”

“Why did either of you want me?” And he seemed so baffled by whatever was going on in his head - the subject change was indeed like a rollercoaster - it came out snarky. “Both of you decided, in the last three days, that I was an endgame.”

That hit her. Like a bowling ball to the stomach, Felicity felt that.

Laurel... had made a play?

Slowly, she turned to the woman in question and she wasn’t sure how she looked but the way Laurel swiftly shut her eyes at the sight, told Felicity everything.
“It wasn’t like that.” Laurel explained, her eyes still shut. “I had to try.”

Oliver immediately followed with, “Like Sara had to try?” It wasn’t a welcoming tone, or even an understanding one. He still sounded betrayed and he looked worse. “The world’s coming down around us, I finally find who I’ve been looking for all my life and now’s the time you both decide... to try. Now.”

Again, there was a pause.

Well... everyone else was silent but Felicity was more or less buoyant. On air.

I finally find who I’ve been looking for all my life... I finally find who I’ve been looking for all my life... I finally find who I’ve been looking for all my life...

404 errors: brain cannot compute.

But then Laurel spoke, bringing her back down to the ground... and what she said floored everyone in the room.

“I didn’t say we were wrong.” She admitted. “I said we had to try.”

Oliver waited.

“She saved my life.” It seemed she was on a role with truth telling and Felicity was pretty sure having her jaw on the floor was unflattering at best. “I was foolish: you told me not to get too close to her if she...”

Perhaps she didn’t know how to best phrase how ‘out of sorts’ Felicity had been but Oliver finished it.

“I said ‘don’t get in her way’.”

“You did. And I did.” Laurel looked to her sister. And pleaded. “Sara, it wasn’t her fault.”

It took a single glance from Laurel for Sara to shift. Looking down at her staff, she muttered. “I know.” Her eyes flickered to Nyssa.

Nyssa’s eyes were already on her.

“You’re telling me that the ex-girlfriend told the current girlfriend that her boyfriend, who she’d once cheated on her sister with, said her name in bed?”

And it seemed Isabel couldn’t keep it locked up either.

“And that, while Oliver shacks up with the current girlfriend, his ex-ex-girlfriend tries to make her move?” She shook her head, her hair spilling about her as she smiled. It was a smile made of ice. “And you think I’m a bitch. No wonder Miss Secretary didn’t look surprised when I told her: probably hears it herself all the time.”

For some reason it was pivotal that Felicity get this out. “We aren’t dating.” Why did she have to say this? She didn’t even know.

“What?”

It was flat.
Pretty sure she speaks English. “We aren’t dating.” Why am I even...? “We haven’t,” she couldn’t help it: her eyes locked on Oliver’s as she finished, “slept... together.”

Oliver just looked at her.

Then...

“You ruin everything.”

Sorry? Frowning, felicity glanced back at Isabel to see her moving to stand; her lips were stretched over her teeth. Is she snarling at me?

“We had a plan. Me and Slade. But put one prim and perfect Miss Smoak into the mix and all the men fall to their feet. Inept.”

Er...she was pretty sure that had never happened to her in life. Ever. And I know I’d remember Oliver on his knees before me- stop! Now.

“You plan was flawed from the start.” English accent as pristine as ever, Nyssa stepped in. “You placed faith in a leader that cared for nothing but his vengeance. Makes for a sloppy execution.”

As if too enraged to utter a word, Isabel simply stood there.

For some reason utterly unknown, Sara whispered. “Ollie...”

...At the exact same time laurel did.

Oh boy.

Oliver... turned from them. Side faced. Taking deep breaths. He was... angry didn’t cut it.

Everything about the sisters screamed APOLOGY. But it also spoke of I loved you. It murmured I’ll always miss you.

Sara shuddered what must be a bitter breath at his physical dismissal of her.

And it was added to by the odd way laurel suddenly folded in on herself; an arm wrapping around her middle as her fingers touched her neck once more.

The look in her eyes... something inside her was dying. There was nothing any of them could do to help her. It was something only she walk through: allow herself to let go of something tied so intrinsically to her past.

Oliver didn’t speak.

Felicity watched him... but he made no move.

“I should have said something.”

Oh Sara.

And Sara could be super gentle when she wanted to be. And being gentle? It could sting as much as a slap to the face. “I was trying to keep a part of you with me. When I told Felicity...” looking at her friend now Sara took a breath; the expression on her face making Felicity believe she was giving something up, “when I told you, I didn’t realise it at the time but I think I was...” searching for that perfect word Sara smiled at herself. “I was trying to understand why it didn’t work. Why
me and Ollie didn’t work. Either times.”

You were marking territory.

Felicity almost wanted to say it, because that’s exactly what it had felt like. There had been a heaping serving of obvious pain inside of Sara, of regret. But she hadn’t needed to add every sordid detail of her sex life. Not that she actually had but it hadn’t simply hurt. Those words...

“We know each other that way, how our body’s work, what we like and what we don’t.”

They stayed with Felicity.

She hadn’t needed to hear any of that... but Sara had felt the need.

Lips pressed together, Felicity swallowed it down and said. “I understand.”

And because he knew her, because he was watching her - always watching, because when you loved someone you wanted to get to know them and what better way than to observe - he saw her. Saw the pain.

“Not good enough.” Slicing the atmosphere in half, he gritted out. “How much did you say?”

Swiftly, this doesn’t matter anymore, Felicity looked to him. “Hey.”

His eyes flickered back to hers. Beautiful. He looked amazing; all bent out of shape, his green leather a beacon, his voice a soothing cure for her sores.

And she smiled. Oliver. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” It was harsh, how he shook his head: one fast turn from side to side. Did his neck just crack? “It isn’t okay.”

“Oliver...” she tried, but-

“Felicity.” Holding out a hand – a stop sign – but not to her; it waved about the room at the others. “None of this is okay.”

Just seeing him, she felt his inner turmoil, his self-hate. Thank you Isabel, thank you very much.

Shaking his head at himself, he ran a hand down his face. “I sent you in here.”

And it just came out.

“My love.” As natural as if she’d been calling him that for months.

In one shackled breath, she heard a break in his throat.

My love.

He liked that. “I’m sorry.” Like he couldn’t breathe, it was more whisper than sound.

Now she shook her head. “Don’t do that.” And took a step closer.

Eyes closing, the bridge of his nose rippled with sorrow. “I’m so sorry Felicity.”

A step closer. “Look at me.”
“I said your name.” It was almost high pitched, like he’d been stabbed and couldn’t get more than a few words out at a time. “For months. And I didn’t know. If I had...” both hands coming up, his fingers pressed against the corners of his eyes. “I’d have never... maybe me and Sara-”

“You and Sara happened because you were both what each of you needed at the time.” This could be voiced: she could say this now, because Oliver was hers. You’re mine. “Would you forgive me? Would you even have a second thought?”

How he could look adorably clueless in his green leather suit, she had no idea but he could and he did.

“You wouldn’t-” He began.

“Wouldn’t I?” She moved closer to him, close enough that the others wouldn’t hear or see, not with her back to them.

Oliver blinked at her. “What?”

Licking her lips she thought, this is going to hurt. Me, not him. “Would you forgive me? For saying your name.”

With someone who is definitely not you?

“You wouldn’t.” So definitive was his response that he missed. The. Point.

Just say it.

“Not with another man, no.”

And... boom.

Two things. First her blush, which erupted like Krakatoa.

Second, like a miniature explosion had gone off inside his mind, he didn’t utter a word. He just stared at her. Not gormlessly; there was a lot of life right there on his face. In the dim light his pupils were massive: he looked dumbfounded.

Pretty sure Mutism isn't a thing you can just get, is it?

Eyes searching her face, he still didn’t speak. Maybe he couldn’t. So she did. Hesitatingly.

“It’s something... I keep to myself.” Obviously. People didn’t discuss their masturbatory traditions in public. Backtrack. “It wasn’t something I ever wanted you to know.” Though Isabel’s efforts to infuriate the crowd had been vile, it helped that Oliver knew that she knew about his intimate error. “But I don’t always feel safe. When I’m alone.” She explained.

The air between them felt heavy and light all at once: a heady mixture that made her chest tighten, that made the words both difficult and incredibly easy to say.

“So I think of you.” So high was her voice - so affected - in her effort to sound nonchalant, she was sure she sounded full of it. The hot flush on her neck told her so. “And thinking of you...” Her eyes travelled.

To his throat. To the place where his jacket met his neckline. To where his zipper lay a little further down than usual...
It was his Adam’s apple, his hairline. It was his stance and his broad shoulders. It was that he was bigger, taller than she was – that he could fully encompass her. It was how he sounded when he said *hey*. It was his scent in the Foundry and the way he leaps to protect. It was the way he looked at her, the way his presence always meant home.

It was the warmth of his hands... his touch.

Her voice wobbled, because he was everything. “Thinking of you gives me honest relief.” *Understatement.*

She left it there - sordid detail unrequited and unrequited - but he was smart. He understood. Immediately.

Mouth open, she watched him try for words and she swallowed when nothing was spoken. When he licked his lips because they were super dry. Breathily, he shook his head when he found he had none. A shallow exhale was followed by a louder inhale as his eyes flickered to and from each of hers.

Ten seconds...

Twenty...

Thirty Five seconds...

Vulnerable and oh, so, wishing she’d kept her mouth shut, Felicity closed her eyes with furrowed brow and smiled ill-humouredly. “It doesn’t matter. Just forget I said any-”

The light press of his lips on hers shut her up.

A finger under her chin.

A quick intake of her breath into his mouth.

*Oh... Kay.*

Blinking her eyes back open, she caught Oliver a lot closer to her than he’d been just a few seconds ago, with his head lifting just a few inches away from her face.

He *smiled*.

And by smiled, she means *whoa, holy mother of God.*

Devastating.

She’d never, not once, seen him beam like that; as if hope, love and happiness were inevitable in his life. Delight. Surprise. Love. Awe.

It was all there to see.

*Why didn’t I bring a camera?*

It was *her* smile, only more. His eyes crinkled - if he laughed more there’d be a bigger crease – and there was a definite aura of ‘happy’ all over him.

But he also looked... *no. Really?* There was a cocky edge to his grin.
Attempting offense, Felicity tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. “Would you like a round of applause?”

Because he looked downright smug.

A laugh just bounced right out of him; loud and imperfect and so sexy to her ears. It thrilled her to the core. Honestly it was impossible to even pretend to be mad at the guy.

When his eyes came back to her, the smile on his face was so wide she saw every single tooth in his mouth. “We’ll talk more. After.” He murmured.

She liked that, like the promise of after. “After.”

“Together.”

“Together.”

“Leave Starling with me.”

Mind blanking temporarily, Felicity crashed to a halt. “Huh?”

“Sara!”

Head whipping around, Felicity had a bare second to process Isabel hightailing it towards the rear entrance to the Factory as Nyssa pelted Arrows in her direction. Giving chase, she too vanished moments later.

And on the ground, Sara was pulling herself to her feet and wiping her lip. “Dropped my guard.” She told them as straightened, her eyes moving from one to the other. “Get Slade. Hold off the others.”

Then she too, exited the room.

**BANG**

And because problems came in threes, the barred metal sliding door on the east side of this massive room gave way to what sounded like a fist-

**BANG BANG BANG BANG BANG**

Or a dozen fists. Mirakuru enhanced fists.

Slipping around her, Oliver skidded to a halt by his bow. *Moment definitely over.*

“Stay here.” She said, making him look back at her as he notched an arrow; ready for the coming horde. “I’ll find Slade.”

For a long moment - maybe ten metres apart - she and Oliver gazed at each other.

It may have been his idea but he didn’t like it. Not at all.

Expression hard... he nodded. “Dig’s already here.”

As if to emphasis this point, gunfire started to sound from somewhere within the walls around them.
“Go.” It wasn’t a command; it was a plea. *Go and come back.* “I’ll find you.”

Softly, she smiled at him; even as she started walking backwards. “Always.”

It flashed over his eyes. “Felicity...”

“I love you.”


_Holy Han Solo._

Trying not to laugh - however anxiously - she twisted, running from the room and past the steel pipes. Leaving him there.

_I’m not leaving him behind. I can’t. He is me._

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