No Way Out But Through

As the Arrow, as Queen Consolidated's CEO and with Felicity as his better half, life has never been quite so ideal for Oliver before. But the League of Assassins is still after Thea and Malcolm and, with both of them proving elusive over the last eight months, the League takes aim a little closer to home to draw them out, setting off a chain of events that none of them saw coming.

Notes

This is a sequel to 'Actions Speak Louder Than Words (and other true sayings).' If you haven’t read that, I highly recommend reading it first. There are also some one-shots I’ve written (and will continue to write) set in this universe. While those are less necessary, I'd recommend at least reading 'Lines' as this is set immediately after it. This is going to be a long
fic... not sure how long yet. I aim to keep every chapter 4-8k and I'm hoping to update every weekend. I hope. Thank you for reading!
Before, when she'd run off with Malcolm Merlyn, it had mostly been anger and desperation that had fueled Thea's choices. She hadn't hated it. Not then. Because, questionable as it might have been, it had still been her choice.

That's not true this time.

She's not here because she decided to be. Not really. She's here because her life is in danger. She's here because Oliver and Malcolm have declared that she should be. And the more time that passes, the less it all seems worth it. She doesn't have a death wish, but after eight months in hiding she's tired of pretending this is living.

"Seasick?" Malcolm asks her, leaning against the railing next to her.

"You know, it takes a special kind of jackass to make me hide out on a boat, all things considered," Thea points out darkly.

Malcolm concedes her point with an indulgent nod and too much amusement in his eyes. Like he wasn't the one who sank the Queen's Gambit. Like he didn't kill her father and condemn her brother to five years in isolation fighting for his own survival. Father or not, savior or not, she's slowly learning to hate Malcolm.

"I want to go home," she tells him, folding her arms across her chest in petulant defiance.

"I know," Malcolm admits. "As… delightful as this bonding experience has been, you're a beautiful, intelligent young woman. You deserve more than a life in hiding with your father."

"But…?" She asks, because she knows it's coming.

"But things are taking longer than I'd expected," he allows. "I have things in motion. Plans that will set us free, give us the upper hand. But these things take time, Thea. You need to be patient."

"I'm done being patient," she tells him, chin jutting out proudly. "It's been eight months and I've missed everything because I'm stuck hiding out here with you."

"You aren't looking at the big picture," he tells her with a pitying shake of his head. "You're smarter than this. Missing out on playing nurse with Roy and coffee dates with your brother's secretary are blips, barely noteworthy details of your life."

"Sometimes that's the important stuff," she tells him defiantly.

"So's being alive," he points out.
She's about to respond when the distinctive noise of a jet ski draws her attention. It's closing in on them from the north, the shoreline vaguely discernible behind it. She can't make out the figure driving it yet, but she can see it's only one person.

"Get below deck," Malcolm orders, gripping her elbow.

"No," Thea says petulantly, yanking her arm from his grasp.

Malcolm's face hardens, twists into something darker, something more honest than the mask he's been wearing these past few months. Disturbing as that is, it's also something of a victory for Thea. She's tired of playing by his rules.

"What happens next is on you," he tells her gravely.

He's armed. She knows he is. He always is. And, besides, she's pretty sure Malcolm can be termed a weapon all on his own.

"I make my own mistakes. I'm not taking responsibilities for yours, too," Thea informs him. "I refuse to hold myself accountable for your actions just because I won't hide anymore."

"I wish I'd known about you sooner, Thea," Malcolm tells her. "You have too much of your mother in you."

She's seething at that. Her mother… her dead mother who he had an affair with, dumped his son on, turned into a widow and blackmailed into a conspiracy designed to kill thousands. And he has the nerve…

"Given my genetic options, I think that was probably for the best," she snaps.

The figure in the distance is closer now. Close enough that Thea can make out that it's a woman with blonde hair. She squints, blinks against the glare of the sunshine reflecting off of the blue waters of the Mediterranean. Recognition hits right as she's aware of Malcolm raising his bow.

"It's Sara," Thea shouts, placing a hand on Malcolm's arm.

"I know," Malcolm replies, his focus unwavering.

"You aren't going to shoot Sara!" Thea demands, stepping in front of his nocked arrow.

"Get out of the way," he orders.

"No!" Thea says, planting her hands on her hips. "This is Sara. I've known her nearly my whole life. She's my friend."

"She's the lover of the Heir to the Demon," Macolm tells her. "You need to rethink her place in your life and you need to move out of the way."

"No," Thea says again with determination and grit.

Malcolm pushes her out of the way, shoving her to the side and letting loose an arrow in the direction of the jet ski. Sara swerves, anticipating the shot and avoiding it with practised ease. Malcolm grabs another arrow almost instantly, though. An explosive one this time, Thea can tell. Malcolm is an excellent shot and even a near miss at this point could kill Sara if the gasoline on her jet ski ignites.

Thea isn't going to take that risk.
She charges Malcolm, gripping his bow and pulling it down. He can't aim with her tugging on the bow and he can't hurt her. Not really. But he's *livid*. Fury boiling in his gaze as he looks at her.

"SARA!" Thea shouts as loud as she can, her concern entirely for the other woman and not at all for herself.

Messed up as Malcolm might be - and he really, really is - he's not about to hurt Thea. And she knows it. And that gives her power, gives her control. No wonder he's so mad, she realizes, Malcolm has never done well with control resting in the hands of others.

Sara speeds up at Thea's cry, reaches the boat faster than Thea would have thought possible and boards in short order.

"I'm here to help," the blonde says, her hands up in a gesture of goodwill. "I'm not here for the League."

"Forgive me if I don't take you at your word," Malcolm replies coldly.

"You're going to have to," Sara tells them earnestly. "Because you need my help."

"Why?" Malcolm asks, his tone sharp.

"Because they know where you are. And they're coming," Sara says gravely.

"Is Ollie-?" Thea starts.

"He's fine," Sara says reassuringly. "Everyone back home is fine. It's you we need to worry about right now."

"Does he know you're here? Is he coming, too?" Thea asks, looking hopefully back out toward the ocean as if her brother might appear out of the blue.

"No," Sara says, lips pressed together thinly as she shakes her head. "I came straight from Bucharest and they're probably watching Ollie. There wasn't time to call him or a way to warn him without them finding out. The League is right behind me. We need to go. *Now.*"

"It's too late for that," Malcolm says, eyes on the horizon as his grip tightens on his bow.

It takes a moment for Thea to see what he sees, a dark speck in the sky off in the distance, closing in quickly.

"Is that a *helicopter*?" Thea asks, blinking at it.

"It's the League," Sara says in frustration. "We're going to have to fight."

"*You're* going to fight the League? *Beside me*?" Merlyn asks skeptically.

"If this were just about you, I wouldn't. But it's not. The League isn't going to be satisfied until they make you suffer and I will fight to keep Thea safe, even if it means having to fight at your side," Sara says, pulling a staff off of her back. "I have enough blood on my hands. I refuse to add hers."

"How very noble," Malcolm says with clear distaste.

"I understand that might be a foreign notion to you, Malcolm, but some of us have a sense of honor," Sara tells him.
"I find your newly grown sense of morality confusing, but since it benefits me for now I'll accept it as a strange and nonsensical quirk."


"I can help. I can fight," Thea insists, stance firm.

"Not against the League, you can't," Sara tells her levelly. "I'm sure Malcolm's worked with you. I will, too, if you let me. But you aren't ready for this and if you're on deck, Malcolm and I will both be distracted trying to keep you safe. Get below deck, lock the door and arm yourself."

Thea hesitates for a moment, looks toward Malcolm who nods almost imperceptibly, before sighing in resignation.

"Fine. But if you two die or one of you kills the other I'm going to be really pissed," Thea announces before turning on her heel and heading below deck.

There's quiet for a second, adversarial and thick. The helicopter is still too far away for Malcolm to shoot arrows or the League to shoot them. And it's strange, Malcolm and Sara standing side-by-side. They are opposites in so many ways. He who ran to the League to escape the helplessness and rage of his own life, her who was saved by the League when she couldn't find her way back to her own life, as much as she wanted to. He who left the League to chase his own vendettas, her who once left because she'd had enough of vendettas to last her a lifetime. They are not allies. Not really. But in this - in keeping Thea safe - their interests align.

"How do I know you won't just turn around and hand me over to Nyssa?" Malcolm asks.

"You don't," Sara tells him. "But the League doesn't just want your head on a platter at this point. You've kept them running after you for nearly a year, now. They want you to suffer. That means using Thea against you. I won't let that happen. She's been through too much already and I have a real problem with women suffering for the sake of punishing men."

"They see her as a tool to get to me," Malcolm agrees.

"Their vision is limited. She's more than that," Sara says firmly. "Everyone is more than that. I'm not going to let her be a sacrificial pawn in a struggle between two men who want to play at being king."

Malcolm's eyebrows raise at that, more at her obvious distaste for Ra's al Ghul than her distaste for him. She has, perhaps, said more than she ought to have. But that matters little at the moment because the League is closing in fast and Nyssa is visible, standing with her bow already aimed out the side of the helicopter's open door.

"I don't need pawns to declare checkmate," Malcolm smirks, raising his bow to aim at the helicopter. Sara's eyes widen a little as she sees the arrow he's using. She starts, gasps in protest but doesn't make any sudden movements to stop him before he lets loose the arrow toward the League helicopter. Instead, she turns to look at Nyssa, fear and desperation in her eyes as the explosive arrow heads in her lover's direction. Nyssa sees it too, though. And she's clever. One doesn't live their entire life as an assassin without honing a fine sense of self-preservation.

Nyssa lets loose an arrow, too, a grappling hook that sinks into the side of the boat. And then she jumps to the water. She breaks the surface of the ocean just as Merlyn's arrow hits her helicopter. The rest of the League members on board are not so lucky. Merlyn's aim is true, as it usually is, and the explosion that follows sends chunks of twisted, fiery metal that used to be a helicopter into the ocean below. A rotor blade misses Nyssa by inches, as she retracts the grappling hook line and zips
toward the boat, escaping the fiery debris crumbling into the ocean around her.

It takes a moment for Sara to breathe normally again. She might be dedicated to helping save Thea, but she’s not willing to sacrifice Nyssa in the process. That hadn’t even seemed like a possibility until just now. Nyssa is vibrant, powerful, larger-than-life. The notion that Malcolm Merlyn might be able to kill her is simply wrong.

"No," Sara says sharply as Malcolm raises his bow again, eyes on Nyssa in the water.

"How did you think this would end?" Malcolm asks her. "She’s hunting me. She’s hunting my daughter."

"And if you kill Ra's' daughter, what is it that you think he’ll do?" Sara asks defiantly. "You know him as well as anyone. How would he take that kind of betrayal?"

Malcolm actually pauses at that, considers her words.

"He would burn Starling City to the ground," Malcolm decides.

"In case it's occurring to you about now that that was more or less your goal, I'm gonna point out that you're not entirely right. He would destroy the city, but only to destroy you. To destroy the memory of you, to erase you from existence before he locks you away to die a slow, painful, pitiful death," Sara asserts.

She's not wrong. They both know this. And of Malcolm Merlyn's weaknesses, ego is the greatest. He will not settle for being forgotten by history.

Nyssa is aboard the boat a moment later, anger burning in her eyes even as her soaking wet form creates puddles on the deck.

"You would aid him?" Nyssa asks darkly, hurt slicing through her gaze as she looks to Sara.

"I would protect Thea," Sara emphasizes. "Nyssa… I don't want to fight you."

"Then I suggest you get out of my way," Nyssa announces, eyes flitting toward Merlyn.

"I can't do that. Nyssa, you know why I can't do that. This is wrong," Sara implores.

"It is the will of the Demon's Head," she replies, as if that excuses everything, but there is apology in her tone.

"That doesn't make it right," Sara counters.

"It is neither right nor wrong," Nyssa responds. "It merely is."

"Whatever the League's faults, it has a code," Sara points out. "We don't hunt the innocent."

"The blood of my enemy is my enemy," Nyssa recites. "Examples must be made. And if we cannot get to Malcolm Merlyn through Thea Queen, we will get to Thea Queen through her blood. The longer this goes on, the more the punishment spreads."

"Are you threatening Oliver?" Sara asks, blinking in surprise.

"After a fashion," Nyssa replies, offering no further clarification. "I do not wish this, beloved. But my will in this is immaterial."
"Only because you let it be, Nyssa," Sara implores, taking a stilted step forward. "Forget your father's will. Walk away. With me. Please. We can do this."

It's obvious that Sara's words pain her. Nyssa's face is all longing and regret. But she is a child of the League. She has known no other life and her entire existence has been spent under her father's thumb. There is never a question as to her response. Not for Sara.

"Dreams are for when we sleep. It does not do to dwell on them in the light of day, my love," Nyssa tells her. "I must do as my father commands. His will is absolute."

"There will come a day, I think, when you will regret that," Sara says sadly.

"Such a day is not only in the future, beloved," Nyssa tells her, rueful smile curling at her lips.

"Touching," Merlyn says dryly.

"You would do well not to mock me," Nyssa growls in his direction.

"And you'd do well not to fight me, but it looks like neither one of us is going to do that, doesn't it?" He counters.

Nyssa snarls before lunging. She is fury given form, a storm of anger and brutality directed wholly at Malcolm Merlyn. And she might have beaten him easily, had Sara not been a part of the equation as well.

When Nyssa fights, she fights to kill. This has been ingrained in her from the time she could scarcely walk. When you fight, you fight to take a life. You fight to the end. But Nyssa has no desire to see the life fade from Sara's eyes. She doesn't want Sara's end. She would fight against that. And it makes battling her lover a foreign kind of thing. She doesn't know what winning looks like if it doesn't mean standing over another person's body.

Malcolm Merlyn has no such reservations, though.

The battle is fairly short-lived and entirely absent of weapons, if one ignores that Nyssa, Sara and Malcolm are their own weapons. Nyssa is an incredible fighter, but she cannot hold off both Merlyn and Sara. Not when she's unwilling to kill one of her assailants. And, in the end, she is bloodied and on her knees on the deck of the boat with Sara and Malcolm both standing over her, each of them worse for wear but obviously victorious.

So, apparently this is what winning looks like when one isn't standing over another person's body.

At least, they aren't yet.

"Kill me and you will never escape the Demon. He will hunt you to the ends of the earth and beyond. He will desecrate your bones and spread a plague of death and destruction upon everything you have ever touched until it is nothing but a memory of ash and ruin," Nyssa says pridefully, a stark contrast to her position disarmed and forced to her knees in front of Malcolm Merlyn.

"I think you overestimate your father's affections for you," Malcolm says with condescending sympathy.

"You aren't killing her," Sara insists, whole body tense as she stands on edge facing Malcolm.

"And you're going to stop me?" Malcolm asks skeptically.
"If you're going to kill her, you'll have to kill me first. If you even can," Sara announces. "I can't imagine that would go over terribly well with Thea, would it?"

Malcolm's frustration is palpable and he hisses through his teeth in Sara's direction, giving her a warning look.

"You need to figure out whose side you're on," he informs her.

"I'm on my side, the side that means no one I care about dies," Sara tells him. "Not Nyssa, not Thea. You… well, you I care less about, but your death would hurt Thea, so…"

"Charming," Malcolm sneers. "So it appears we're at an impasse."

"Nyssa will leave. Without you and without Thea," Sara declares.

"I will not," Nyssa declares hotly.

"You will," Sara tells her with defiance. "We'll leave together on the jet ski. Tomorrow, when Malcolm and Thea have had a chance to disappear, you will be free to go. But until then, you will not leave my sight."

"You're taking her prisoner?" Malcolm asks with surprise.

"I'm giving you cover for a getaway," Sara responds.

"You honestly think you can control her? We are talking about the daughter of the Demon," Malcolm points out. "She trained both of us. We barely subdued her together. What chance do you have alone?"

"I'll drug her if I have to," Sara says. "But I don't think I'll have to. Will I, Nyssa? This is that weekend in Dawei all over again."

"Sara…" Nyssa says with great hesitance and entirely too much longing as she looks up at the blonde. "My father—"

"Will never know you weren't taken captive and drugged," Sara tells her.

"Stolen moments with you are a betrayal to him, my love," Nyssa tells her.

"And ordering you to kidnap or murder a blameless teenager isn't a betrayal of you?" Sara questions. "I understand why you stay. I do. The League is all you've ever had."

"And yet you try to seduce me away from it?" Nyssa asks with a dry laugh.

"If you'll let me," Sara replies. "But either way, we're getting on that jet ski together and leaving Thea and Malcolm alone."

"You are aware that this is why my father objects to you?" She asks, as Sara reaches for her hand and helps her to stand. "You make me weak, vulnerable. Human."

"He objects to me because he doesn't see women as equals to men and he surely doesn't take seriously the idea of a woman loving another woman. Just goes to show how fallible he really is, doesn't it?" Sara asks with a little smile, wiping some blood away from Nyssa's lips.

"I have no desire to harm Thea Queen," Nyssa says. "But… Sara if the League does not get to her, things will be so much worse. There are horrors he has planned that even you can scarcely begin to
imagine."

"Will you tell me?" Sara asks curiously, clearly unsure of what answer to expect.

"I... Sara... " Nyssa says, her voice pained.

"We don't need to be enemies in this, Nyssa," Sara says. "We don't need to be enemies in anything."

"I will consider your words. And your request," Nyssa says after a moment of hesitance.

"Contact Oliver," Sara says, directing her words back toward Malcolm who continues to watch them cautiously. "He needs to know what's going on. And, frankly, if the League can find you here, I'm not sure you're able to protect Thea anymore."

"And he can?" Malcolm asks, distaste coloring his words.

"I think the two of you can. Sometimes home turf is an advantage," Sara tells him.

"And sometimes it's a homing beacon," Malcolm counters pointedly. "There are problems in Starling City beyond just the League's reach and there's a reason we've been frequenting countries without extradition treaties."

"Regardless, running isn't working anymore. It was a stopgap measure at best and it's usefulness is over," Sara tells him.

"On that, at least, we agree," Malcolm concedes.

"When next I see you, Malcolm Merlyn..." Nyssa says warningly.

"Save your threats," Malcolm tells her. "You're nothing but an arrow. You aren't aiming the bow. You aren't even pulling back the string. You're an instrument of destruction with no choices to call your own. Your threats mean nothing."

"Nyssa," Sara says, tugging the other woman by the arm to hold her back even as she starts toward Merlyn. "Drop it. Nyssa, let it go."

The assassin listens, even as fury burns in her eyes. Her eyes drift down to Sara's grip on her forearm and something softens in her gaze, shifts and morphs from frustration and ire to longing and pain. And love. Always love. Even when Nyssa had been sent to kill her, she'd not been able to keep that out of the equation.

"We'll be in touch," Sara tells Malcolm, tugging Nyssa toward the jet ski.

"You'll forgive me if that isn't exactly reassuring," Malcolm tells her dryly.

Sara smiles back, toothy and unsettlingly.

"Good," she tells him. "It wasn't meant to be."

"Don't forget you've got that thing at that place with those people today," Felicity says, slipping on a pair of truly awesome electric green strappy high heels as she sits perched on the edge of their bed.
Oliver pauses from where he's knotting his tie and catches her eye in the mirror.

"Should I be concerned that I actually understood that?"

"I dunno. Are you?" She asks curiously, head tilted to the side as she looks up at him.

"Not even a little," he replies with a laugh.

"Well good, then," she grins back, cheeks dimpling and eyes alight. "Me either."

"You call your mom back yet?" He asks, finishing with his tie and taking a couple of steps over towards her.

"Ugh, no," she says, wrinkling her nose. "She wants me to set her up with Walter. Walter, Oliver. I mean can you imagine that? He's the most British to ever British and she's just… so Vegas."

"I can't see him being interested, no offense to your mom," Oliver smiles back.

"Thank goodness! Can you imagine if he was? My mother and your ex-step-father?" She asks pointedly. "Just a little incesty, there. More Clueless levels than Game of Thrones, but still."

"There are days I wish you hadn't caught me up quite so much on pop culture references," he counters with a wince. "This is one of them."

"Sorry," she replies, though her smile suggests otherwise. "But my mom… I just can't believe she wants me to set her up with Walter."

"I'm pretty sure she's made her way through most of the board members, so I'm not actually that surprised," he shrugs.

"Oh God, there's a mental image I didn't need. Thank you for that," she replies with a shudder as he takes her hand and helps her to her feet. "I'm not even going to be able to look at the board next month, you realize?"

"We should just tell them she'll be there. Then most of them will beg off, we'll have to reschedule and you and I can go on vacation instead," he suggests with a horribly rakish grin that makes him look entirely too self-satisfied.

"Vacation, huh?" She asks indulgently, because he's adorable like this and she cares far more about that then the fact that they're going to be late for his morning meeting with the director of human resources.

"Someplace warm. Sunny. Where I can get you into a bikini," he declares, skimming a hand up her bare arm.

"You say 'into' and yet I'm fairly sure you mean 'out of,'" she smirks, shivering a little as his calloused fingers work their way up the back of her upper arm to drift along her shoulder and trace the curve of her collarbone.

"Details."

Yeah, they're totally in danger of missing that meeting all together if they aren't careful.

"You're usually really good with details," she murmurs, leaning in a little.

Forget the meeting. It's just HR. She can reschedule it for Oliver for anytime that isn't now. Or he
can be late. It's not like he's known for his timeliness anyhow.

She'd known, even before they'd really gotten together, that she'd probably always find him attractive; she'd probably always be drawn to him physically. What she hadn't anticipated was the sense of rightness that washes over her whenever they have a chance to just be them.

His lips against hers are familiar at this point, but something about it feels new every time. There's still that sense of anticipation and excitement at his touch and, after eight months together, she's thinking that might not be a thing that ever goes away.

She hopes it doesn't.

Because this is perfect. This is home.

She sighs against his lips and twines her fingers in the short hairs at the nape of his neck, scritching her nails against his scalp in a way that always makes him go just a little boneless against her. One of his hands spans her back, bracing against it and holding her tightly against him. The other has slid down and is palming her ass.

It's the second hand that tells her definitively that he has no intention of leaving their apartment anytime soon.

"You should call Ortiz," Felicity murmurs as they part, her lips a hairsbreadth away from his.

"If you were thinking about Ortiz while we were kissing, it's going to be a little bit of a hit to my ego," Oliver tells her with an amused look. "I might have to kiss you again just to make a point."

She swats at his chest lightly because he's ridiculous and highly distracting and she loves it.

"Oliver he's like a hundred and twenty and you're just going to leave him waiting in your office?"

"Seventy-two," Oliver corrects. "And I'd text him but he refuses to use a cell phone."

"Then call his office and have his assistant go up and get him so we can stay here or you can try to keep your hands to yourself, fix your hair and we can head upstairs to meet him," Felicity says. "Frankly, I'm hoping you choose 'Option A,' even though I'm pretty sure that makes me a terrible employee."

"Makes you a great girlfriend though," he grins, kissing her again.

And... yeah. He's totally going with 'Option A.' If she has a mental fistpump of triumph at that, she figures no one could reasonably blame her. Except maybe Ortiz, but he doesn't need to know.

"Call his assistant," Felicity says as they part again, taking a full step back away from his reach.

The look he gives her is heavy and sends a shudder down her spine just as surely as if he'd been dragging his fingers up it. But he listens. Surprisingly. Oliver can be kind of single-minded sometimes.

His hand is literally on his phone when there's a solid knock at their door. There are very few people who have access to their floor without security clearing it with her or Oliver first and none of them are people Felicity expected to see this morning so the confusion that runs across her face is understandable.

"I've got it. You call Ortiz's assistant," Felicity orders, straightening her dress as she heads to the
There's another sharp rap before she gets the door open and when she does, the face that greets Felicity's is a total surprise. Technically, Pamela is one of the handful of people who don't need security clearance to get to their floor. In practice, she's only come up twice and both times she'd been expected. Today, she definitely wasn't

"Hey," Felicity says, her voice phrasing the word more like a question than a statement, really.

"Good morning," Pamela greets.

It's stiff, though, Pamela's words. She looks ill-at-ease in a way that's totally foreign on the brash, confident Public Relations Director. Her eyes are serious and almost anxious and the smile that flits across her face in greeting is both disingenuous and brief.

It's jarring.

"Is everything okay?" Felicity asks warily.

"Can I come in?" Pamela asks, which is not a reply at all and worries Felicity hugely.

"Yeah… yes, of course," Felicity says opening the door further and gesturing for Pamela to come in.

Oliver apparently finished his phone call in near record time and is standing a few paces away looking every bit as confused and vaguely concerned as Felicity feels.

"What's wrong?" Oliver asks immediately.

"We should sit down," Pamela says, fingers drumming against a manilla envelope in her hand.

"Pamela," Oliver says warningly.

"Trust me, Oliver. Sit down," Pamela says a little more firmly.

It's actually slightly comforting, hearing that authoritative tone from Pamela. She seems… strange without it.

"Is the company-" Oliver starts, but Pamela cuts him off with a swift shake of her head.

"This isn't about QC, Oliver," she tells him. "This is about you."

Felicity's heart hammers wildly in her chest at this because oh God who knows about the Arrow now? Are they outted entirely? She hasn't turned on the television today. Is this eight months ago all over again?

Oliver grabs her hand, tangles their fingers together and squeezes. She looks up at him with something close to panic written across her face and he looks back with solidarity and reassurance. She hadn't realized how much she needed that until she got it. They are them. They will deal with this, whatever that means.

She does sit, though. And she pulls Oliver down next to her. Pamela, however, paces the space in front of their coffee table while she tries to form whatever words she needs to get out.

"What do they have, Pamela?" Oliver asks.

"Nothing… yet," Pamela replies. "And if you want this kept out of the press, no matter how you
"I want to deal with this, I will do my very best to make that happen."

"Okay…” Oliver says warily, glancing from Felicity to Pamela and back because this isn't making sense yet.

"I'm not sure you'll want Felicity here for this," Pamela says finally, her pacing stopping as she looks toward Oliver.

"There is no part of my life that Felicity isn't a part of," Oliver says levelly. "Whatever's out there, whatever you know. I promise, she knows it, too."

Pamela laughs at that, dry and humorless.

"No," Pamela counters. "She doesn't. I thought you did. But now… I'm pretty sure I was wrong. And you should know."

"I don't understand," Felicity says. "This isn't about…"

She stops herself before she gets any further. Because Pamela knows about the Arrow, but she doesn't know about the Arrow. And they've been very careful to keep it that way.

"This is about twenty years of secrets I've kept for Oliver's family," Pamela says seriously. "At least it's about one of the secrets I've kept for his family."

"Felicity stays," Oliver says, looking concerned about whatever Pamela's about to say, but holding on to Felicity's hand tightly all the same.

Pamela nods and there's another weird silence like she can't quite get the words out she needs to say. But Oliver is edgy, impatient and he's not all that inclined to give her time to reformulate whatever speech she's figured out in her head.

"Pamela," he says sharply and she nods again.

"I thought you knew," she says again. "Really, I did. But after the conversation we had last week when Felicity was sick… it became pretty clear you didn't."

"What don't I know?" Oliver asks, quickly losing patience.

"Your parents relied on me for a lot," Pamela reminds him, fidgeting awkwardly while she speaks. "I never knew about the plan to destroy the Glades, obviously. I would never have gone along with anything designed to murder people. But other things… I covered up a lot of sins for the sake of the company - your parents' affairs, Thea's parentage, some of your pre-island escapades, some of Thea's wilder party days. Protecting the Queen family image is an integral part of protecting Queen Consolidated's image. And even when it didn't sit well with me, it was obviously necessary so I went along with it."

"You're telling me there's something you covered up for my family that I don't know about?" Oliver asks.

"I'm telling you there's something I covered up for you that you don't know about," Pamela clarifies.

"What?" Oliver demands gruffly.

"A little more than ten years ago, your mother called me to come out to Queen Manor," Pamela says slowly. "She needed my help to keep in press in the dark and to funnel a fairly sizable amount of
money to a girl named Sandra Hawke."

Oliver utterly freezes at that, his whole body tensing in an instant. The only movement from him at all is the widening of his eyes. He gets what this is. Obviously he does. But the dots haven't quite connected for Felicity yet.

"Who is Sandra Hawke?" Felicity asks after a moment, taking in the silent communication between Pamela and Oliver.

"She's…" Oliver starts, but he doesn't seem to quite know where to go with it. "There was a… brief relationship between me and her at one point. She's the one I almost had a kid with."

Pieces start clicking into place in Felicity's head with that information and she desperately hopes she's wrong about the picture that's forming because Oliver will not handle it well if she's right.

"Are you telling me…" Oliver starts, looking up at Pamela as he speaks before breaking off his train of thought as he stands and starts to pace, all nervous energy with nowhere to go. "Are you telling me that my mother paid off a girl to keep quiet about miscarrying my child or…"

He can't finish his question. It's too much. And from the look on Pamela's face, Felicity knows the answer before the other woman even opens her mouth. What she doesn't know is how to support Oliver while he hears the truth.

"I'm telling you that your mother paid off a pregnant young woman to disappear," Pamela says, no small amount of sympathy in her voice.

Oliver crumbles at this, head in his hands and shoulders hunched protectively as he faces away from both of them. This will eat at him from the inside out. He will blame himself. Felicity knows this as surely as she knows her own name.

"Hey," she says, getting up and going to him, wrapping her arms around his middle and hugging him fiercely, cheek pressed against his chest. "This isn't your fault. We'll deal with this. I love you. Okay?"

He doesn't respond, either verbally or physically. But he doesn't push her away either and she counts that as a win.

"Moira said you knew," Pamela tells him. "She said you knew and you weren't ready for that kind of responsibility so she was doing what was best for everyone. And I'm sorry, Oliver. Had I realized what was actually going on…"

"I have a ten year old?" Oliver asks, blinking back toward Pamela as if he hasn't heard anything anyone has said since the bit about paying off a pregnant woman to disappear.

"His name's Connor," Pamela says.

"I have a son," Oliver says blankly, like the words aren't quite making sense in his head.

"I have pictures… if you want them," Pamela tells him, gesturing with the envelope she's been holding the whole time before putting it down on the coffee table.

Oliver's eyes can't seem to break away from that sealed envelope, but he makes no move to open it.

"I wasn't ready," he admits. "Neither was Sandra, I'm sure. But I would have never… I would have found a way. For a kid… for my son to grow up without a dad is just… With how distant my father
was when I was growing up, I always swore…”

He can't seem to fully finish a thought and Felicity can't blame him for that in the least. He's overwhelmed, which is fair. This is overwhelming. And unexpected. And, yeah, she might have to take some time to process what this might mean for her life too, in the next few days, since she's just found out that her live-in-boyfriend has a ten-year-old. But that's for later. Now is about Oliver. And the soothing hand she keeps running up and down his back doesn't seem to be offering him the comfort she wishes it would.

"When I realized you didn't know about him… I wasn't going to let that stand," Pamela tells him. "If you want to keep this quiet, we will. If you want to be a part of his life and keep it out of the press, I'll find a way because I owe you that much at the very least. If you want this to go full-court press, I'll manage that, too."

"Is he… is he happy?" Oliver asks, looking at Pamela like she has all the answers.

It kills Felicity a little that that's his first question. He doesn't ask what he looks like, doesn't ask if Sandra ever got married and gave him a step-father, doesn't want to know if he has legal grounds to take Connor since Sandra lied to him about the boy's very existence. No. Oliver's very first thought about his son is to ask if he's happy.

All-in-all, that makes sense, though. Happiness is something that had often proven elusive for Oliver.

"I think so," Pamela replies. "But if you really want to know, I think you'll have to find out for yourself."

Oliver turns away at that, his face thoroughly unreadable. But Felicity knows him. She knows him. If Connor is happy without him, he's thinking, then he's probably better off without Oliver in his life. Felicity knows this is his thought process without him saying a word.

"This is gonna take a while to sink in. You'll need to process. I know. I mean, I would," Felicity says before screwing her face funny as she thinks about her words. "Not that anyone could pop out of the woodwork and tell me I had a kid I didn't know about. Obviously. But that's not the point. And I do have one."

"Which is?" Oliver asks.

"That I'll support you whatever you decide to do. And you aren't in this alone," she tells him, taking his hands in hers and looking him in the eye. "But… Oliver, the decision to be a part of his life was taken away from you. For what it's worth, I don't think you should repeat that mistake by taking the same choice away from him."

Oliver says nothing, but he does look at her, eyes searching hers as he clearly lets her words settle in his mind. Maybe he'll heed her words. Maybe he won't. But at least she knows he's considering them. And, as a girl whose dad chose not to be a part of her life, she knows exactly what she's talking about.

"You can leave now," he says to Pamela.

She nods solemnly.

"I am sorry, Oliver," she says again.

"I know you are," he replies. "And when I'm looking at this more objectively I'll probably even forgive you. But that day isn't today."
"That's fair," she smiles grimly before tapping the manilla envelope on the table twice and turning to leave.

The door clicks shut behind her a moment later, leaving Oliver, Felicity and silence alone in the room. It's stifling. And Felicity's not quite sure how to deal with this. What is the protocol for your boyfriend finding out he has a son in the fifth grade?

"Do you want me to go, too?" She asks, watching him closely.

"Yes," he says immediately before sighing and running his hands through his close-cropped hair. "No. Maybe. I don't know."

"Okay," she says easily. "Because, you know, it's okay if you need to be alone with this for a bit and it's okay if you want to lean on me too. I'm good with that. However you need to deal with this, it's fine."

"How are you coping with this so much better than I am?" He asks with a sharp laugh.

"No one lied to me," she points out, running a hand down his arm. "And I'm your girl, no matter what. This is life-altering, yeah, but I love you and my first concern is how you are so I'm dealing with that first. The rest will sink in later, I'm sure."

"I don't deserve you," he mutters.

"Love isn't about deserving someone," she points out. "And even if it was, you would. Because we deserve each other."
"Even if that means you're practically a stepmother to a ten-year-old?" He asks.

She goes a little breathless at that because… yeah, they haven't talked about marriage but it's always felt like something that's understood between them. It's firmly in the 'someday' category.

"I thought we recently established I'd be okay with kids someday as long as they were your kids?"

She points out, leaning her cheek against his shoulder as he stares out the window as the cityscape below. "Admittedly, this isn't quite what I had in mind..."

"Me either," he responds. "I can't believe… ten years. She lied to me. How could she keep this from me? How could my mother keep this from me?"

It makes sense to Felicity, in some ways. It's not a choice she'd ever have made in Sandra's shoes, but the girl had to have been young, scared and wildly intimidated by Moira. Maybe she'd had second thoughts at some point, but pre-island Oliver hadn't exactly been stable or dependable. And then, when Connor was about three, Oliver died… for five years. How do you tell an eight year old that his father isn't actually dead? She must have thought about it at that point, but how could she not have been terrified at the idea of losing her son, either to Oliver or to her own lies. Moira's choices make less sense to Felicity, but then she'd never quite seen eye-to-eye with the Queen matriarch, to put it mildly.

Still, she says none of this to Oliver.

"Maybe you should ask her?" She says instead. "Sandra, obviously… not your mom. Because… well, that reason is obvious, I guess."

It's not quite up there with "He's dead. I mean he drowned" but her penchant for reminding him of his parents' untimely demises still prompts her to wince and makes him raise an eyebrow in her
direction. Well… at least she got a reaction anyhow.

"Do you want to look at the pictures Pamela left?" She asks him curiously.

His eyes drift back toward the envelope, practically burning a hole through it with their intensity, really. But he makes no move to open it or even pick it up.

"Actually… I think… I think I'm gonna go for a walk," he says, looking at her like he's expecting her to object, but Felicity knows better.

"Okay," she says easily. "I'll go up to the office, clear your schedule for the day. Call me if… anything."

"I love you too, you know," he says, kissing the top of her head. "I just need…"

"Space, time. You need to process. I get it," she says reassuringly. "Take a walk, ride your bike, beat up a training dummy, go yell at your mom's gravestone. Whatever you need, Oliver. I'll be here when you get back."

And she will be, she vows silently. Always.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I am insanely behind on replying to comments and I'm sorry for that. I promise to respond soon. I've read every one of them and I am super grateful for the supportive comments I've gotten. They've kept me going.

That being said, I am a little behind on writing for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is family coming in to town, which I'd frankly forgotten was going to happen. I think it unlikely that I'll be able to update next weekend. But, look for a chapter the weekend after. And feel free to watch my Tumblr (same name) for any info on updates.

Of all the places Oliver might have expected to wind up, Laurel's office would not have even been on the list. But the minute he pulls up in front of the building, he knows it's where he needs to be. Whatever happens, however this thing goes, she deserves to hear about Connor from him.

Because this will come out.

Felicity's words have rung in his ears from the moment she spoke them. And she was right. Connor deserves to know the truth. What he decides to do with that truth is, to some extent, up to him. But Oliver has missed out on the first ten years of his son's life. He's not going to miss out on the next ten. Not unless Connor wants nothing to do with him.

Pamela is damn good at her job. There's no question about that. But Oliver doubts that even she can keep the media off the scent of him suddenly showing up at Little League games or parent-teacher night. Are those things he'll get to do, he wonders. Will Connor let him? Will Sandra let him? He doesn't know. Maybe Connor already has someone he calls 'dad.' Maybe he even thinks someone else is his dad. Maybe there's no place in his life for Oliver.

"Are you going to stand out here analyzing the architecture all morning or were you planning on coming in?"

It's Laurel, of course. She's standing a few paces away, arms folded in front of her and her head cocked to the side slightly with an amused look. He's going to ruin her day, he realizes suddenly. It's kind of funny, that realization. He'd sort of thought they'd stopped ruining each other's lives years ago.

"It is nice architecture," he says slowly, as if he's actually giving the building consideration.

"You okay?" She asks, brow furrowing a little.

She reads him better these days than she ever did back when they were together. Or, maybe, she just had turned a willful blind eye to his many indiscretions back then.

"Not really," he admits.
She starts at that, arms falling to her sides and features morphing to blatant concern.

"Is Felicity-" She starts.

"No, it's… this isn't about Felicity," he interrupts. "She's fine. But I got some… startling news today and it's something you really should hear from me."

"Oliver are you… sick or something?" She asks warily.

And, *God*, he's going about this all wrong. Now she thinks he's dying and he's making this worse than it is.

"No, I'm fine. Everyone's fine. It's nothing like that," he tells her to her obvious relief. "Just… do you have time for a coffee?"

"Sure," she says, not even bothering to check her watch.

There's a weird silence that settles over them as they head a block north to a coffee shop. Laurel glances at him entirely too many times in the few minutes it takes them to get there and it does nothing to calm his nerves.

They order. He pays. The shop is fast. They're sitting across from each other in uncomfortable silence faster than he'd anticipated.

"What's this about, Ollie?" She asks finally, her fingers curling around the cup in front of her. "You're sort of freaking me out."

"I was a really terrible boyfriend to you," he starts with, because it's as good a point to start with as any.

Laurel's whole face darkens at this and she sits back in her chair, folding her arms in front of herself again. It's a defensive move and so thoroughly *Laurel* that the body language itself is actually weirdly comforting. He knows this look on Laurel's face. He knows it really, really well.

"If you cheated on Felicity, Oliver, I *swear to God-*"

"What? No. Of course not," Oliver says, simultaneously thrown at the ridiculousness of that thought and by how much he actually appreciates Laurel's indignation on Felicity's behalf.

"Then why are we having an awkward coffee date about how you were a terrible boyfriend to me a decade ago?" Laurel asks pointedly.

"Because I *did* cheat on you," he points out.

"Yes, I'm aware," she replies dryly. "The whole *universe* is aware of that Oliver, thanks to the Gambit sinking. What's your point?"

"Sara wasn't the only girl I cheated on you with," Oliver tells her.

"I never thought she was," Laurel states guardedly. "But that's ancient history and I don't exactly need a list of names from you."

Frankly, he wouldn't be able to give her one even if she wanted it. He was an asshole in those days. He probably didn't even know the names of half the girls he slept with when he was sleeping with them, he surely doesn't remember them a decade later.
"There's one you need," he tells her.

"Why's that?" She prods.

"Because…" He heaves a sigh, flexing his hands and rubbing his thumb against his index finger. "Because I found out today that I have a ten-year-old son."

The shock on Laurel's face is immediate. She looks like she's been slapped. And, maybe on some level she has. The truth can sting. He knows that as well as anyone. Better than most, really.

"You… Are you serious?" She asks.

"I wouldn't joke about something like this, Laurel," he points out uncomfortably.

"Are you sure it's… I mean, no offense here, Ollie, but your taste in women hasn't always been the best. Are you sure the kid is yours?" She asks.

"Yeah," he replies on a sigh, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sure."

"And now the mom is… what? Coming to you for money? Asking you to take your son on a camping trip? What?" Laurel asks briskly.

"You're upset," he says.

"Well of course I'm upset, Ollie! You fathered a child while we were dating. Of course I'm upset. What did you expect?" Laurel asks harshly.

"I don't know," Oliver replies, running a hand through his hair. "I literally found out about Connor an hour ago. I'm not sure I had time to develop any kind of expectation."

"An hour ago?" Laurel asks in surprise. "And you came straight to me?"

"I didn't want you to hear from anyone else," he tells her. "I might have been a terrible boyfriend to you, but I'd like to be a good friend."

She sighs at that, the fight draining out of her. It's because he's right. He knows it. They were toxic together, each bringing out the worst in the other. But these days, as friends, they work in ways they never did as a couple.

"Well, thank you for that, I guess," she acknowledges before taking a sip of her latte. "How are you doing?"

"Honestly?" He asks with a small laugh. "I have no idea."

"You'll figure it out," she declares, eyeing him appraisingly.

"I'll figure out how I'm doing?" He asks.

She looks at him like he's being deliberately obtuse. Because he is. This is difficult enough and he'd prefer not to make it harder.

"You'll figure out how to cope with this… how to be a dad," she clarifies because she's somewhat merciless.

He makes a noise that might be agreement before taking a very long sip of his coffee. He owed Laurel a heads up, but he doesn't particularly want her dissecting him or the situation.
"How did Felicity take it?" Laurel asks.

"Better than me," Oliver says briefly.

"Well that's not surprising," Laurel replies.

She's right. It's not.

"Look... Ollie... I appreciate the forewarning, but I'm not the only one you should be telling, you know?" Laurel asks, watching him closely as she speaks.

"I don't even know what I'm doing yet, Laurel," he tells her. "I haven't even talked to Sandra in more than ten years. She's got no idea that I know about Connor. I have no idea if he knows I exist. I have no clue if I'll even get to be a part of his life. I don't... I just don't know how this works."

"If you want to be a part of your son's life, Oliver, then I will make sure that you get to be a part of your son's life," Laurel says seriously, shifting to lawyer-mode right in front of his eyes. "It's as simple as that. There's tons of legal ground for us here if we need to go that route. I may not focus on family law, but I know the basics and I have friends who specialize in it."

"That's not what I meant," he winces, because he hasn't even seen his kid yet but he can't imagine dragging a ten year old through court battles to try and take him away from the only parent he's ever known, even if it's for split custody or visitation rights. "I mean... I don't want to force myself on his life. If he wants me in it then I'll be there. But I just... I want to do whatever is best for him. Whatever that means."

"Sometimes I wonder exactly what you went through that changed you so very much," Laurel tells him after a beat. He takes another sip of coffee instead of answering her immediately. There's enough going on today. He doesn't need to drag his time on the island or Hong Kong or Russia into it.

"I wouldn't have been a good dad to him before," Oliver acknowledges finally, setting his cup back down. "But I think... maybe now... maybe I could be."

"You could be, Ollie," Laurel says, offering up some measure of reassurance he hadn't realized he'd needed. "You will be. He'll be so lucky to have you in his life now. It won't be easy at first, I'm sure. But it'll be worth it. I'm sure of it."

"Thank you," Oliver tells her through an uncomfortably uncertain smile.

"You need to tell Thea," Laurel points out. "However this goes. You know how she feels about things being kept from her."

"I know," Oliver winces. "But she's not exactly easy to get ahold of these days. I'll... I have a way to let her know I need to talk to her if there's an emergency. I'll get her a message to call me just as soon as it's safe."

"When was the last time you heard from Sara?" Laurel asks curiously.

"Too long ago for comfort," Oliver replies. "Last I heard she was in Turkey leaning on someone who knows about the League and owes her a favor."

"This has gone on too long, Ollie," Laurel tells him.
"I know," Oliver agrees. "Thea's managed to stay safe with Malcolm's protection and an absurd amount of money, but I want her home. Still, we can't storm into Nanda Parbat and win. I'm... actively exploring options."

"What does that mean?" Laurel asks.

"I'm pretty sure you don't want to know," Oliver tells her sincerely.

"You aren't a killer anymore, Oliver," Laurel tells him, reading between the lines.

"To keep my sister safe? I'll be whatever I have to be," he tells her evenly. "Even if that means revisiting parts of my past I'd rather forget."

"Ollie, if ARGUS is willing to-"

"They're not," Oliver says shaking his head. "I went in circles with Waller for months. She won't touch the League. There are... other associates I have who might be more willing."

"Oliver-" Laurel says, shaking her head at him.

"You don't want to know, Laurel," he tells her again, moving to stand. "Trust me. It's better you don't ask."

"My sister is an assassin, Oliver," Laurel points out, looking up at him. "What involvement could you possibly have that you think I won't accept?"

"It might be easier to accept your sister's involvement in a shadowy organization you've never heard of than it would have been if it'd been something you were more familiar with," Oliver tells her.

"Oliver!" She protests, looking shocked.

"Don't worry about it," Oliver tells her.

"How am I supposed to do that, exactly?" She questions.

"Меньше знаешь - крепче спишь," he replies, the Russian slipping easily past his lips.

Her eyes widen further at that and she sucks in a breath, eyeing him cautiously as bits and pieces of their conversation float into place, start to make a picture she surely doesn't want to see.

"The less you know, the more soundly you sleep, Laurel," he clarifies. "Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to."

He leaves without another word. To be honest, he's said too much already.

"What are you doing?" Thea asks curiously as Malcolm sweeps into a room below deck, grabbing an empty knapsack and tossing it at his daughter.

"Pack your things," he instructs her. "We're leaving."
"To go where?" Thea demands, tossing the bag aside. "How long can we run for? How far? Where's Sara?"

"She left," Malcolm tells her.

Thea's staring back like she clearly doesn't believe him, thoroughly on edge and obviously concerned for her friend.

"She did!" Malcolm says more insistently. "Though I find it strangely satisfying that you think I could kill her so easily."

"All it takes is one lucky hit," Thea mutters.

"You'd do well to remember that," he tells her. "Now pack."

"Not until you tell me what happened," Thea states, folding her arms in front of her and raising an eyebrow at him in challenge.

"She and I beat Nyssa. She took Nyssa back to the mainland. When one League member fails, more will come in their wake. Now pack," he snaps.

"Fine," Thea spits back, throwing things haphazardly into her bag. "Where are we going?"

"That depends on your brother," Malcolm tells her.

"My brother?" Thea asks, her hands halting briefly as she looks up at Malcolm in surprise.

"It's been suggested that we should head back to Starling where he can have a more active hand in your protection," Malcolm says.

"That's got to be a blow to your ego," she sasses.

"I've kept you safe for eight months, Thea," he reminds her.

"You're also the reason I'm in danger in the first place," she points out. "If you weren't a mass murderer who betrayed the League of Assassins then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"The Glades is sick," Malcolm argues. "It's a cancer eating away at the city from the inside out. I did the city a favor by destroying part of it. I only wish I had been more successful."

"You're the one who's sick," Thea hisses back.

"Your vision is narrow. And young," he tells her. "In time, you'll see that I'm right."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Regardless, we need to find a way to get a message to your brother that can't be traced by the League," Malcolm tells her. "They know our location. Their resources are limitless and we can't risk them knowing our plans. Even burner phones aren't safe."

"Yeah… don't worry about that," Thea tells him. "I have a way of contacting him. Just get me a computer."

"You can't exactly Facetime him, Thea," Malcolm berates.

"Please. I'm not that naive," she rolls her eyes. "All I need to do is move some money between some
joint offshore bank accounts."

Malcolm cocks his head at this in interest as he appraises her.

"How will that send him a message?" Malcolm asks.

"It's coded," Thea tells him. "If there's multiple transactions at the same time, the first amount is our current coordinates. The second is a phone number. The third is coordinates we should meet at. If there's one with the Queen's Gambit's license number it means there's a life or death situation. If the other one of us transfers the funds back, it means it's not safe to call or meet up. We came up with it after he resurfaced when he'd been gone for months after the earthquake."

Malcolm's face is both smug and absurdly proud.

"You truly are my daughter," he says with great satisfaction.

"Don't be too thrilled," Thea tells him dryly. "It was Oliver's idea."

He shrugs at that, though, barely looking chagrined as he tosses her a tablet.

"Make the transactions," he instructs her.

She stops packing her bag to work on the tablet, quickly accessing the Cayman bank account they use for expressly this purpose. Her fingers still against the smooth glass.

"I don't need to," she tells Merlyn, turning the screen so he can see it. "He already did. This morning. $47,122. That's Starling City. He's telling me to come home."

"Well then," Malcolm announces. "Starling City awaits."

She'd be a lot happier about going home if Malcolm didn't sound quite so satisfied by the idea.

"It is a dangerous game you are playing," Nyssa says as soon as they have reached nearby League safehouse and shut the door to the world outside behind them.

"It's not a game at all," Sara tells her, taking off her jacket and turning to face the other woman.

Her hair is dried now, tangles of dark locks crusted with saltwater. Nyssa is always put together, always looks ready to fight or go to a five-star restaurant at the drop of a hat. Not now, though. Now she looks thrown, out-of sorts. She's still striking, still so very beautiful, but it's jarring to see her like this.

"You should go take a shower. Ocean and leather don't mix very well," Sara says.

"Have you any idea what my father will do to you when he finds out?" Nyssa asks, ignoring Sara's gesture toward the bathroom.

"Of course I do," Sara replies sharply. "I know better than most what your father is capable of."
"Then why do you persist with this foolishness!" Nyssa demands, striding to Sara until they're nearly nose-to-nose. "I cannot bear to lose you."

Sara tucks a stiff dark lock of Nyssa's hair behind her ear. Nyssa blinks rapidly at that, trying to stay unaffected but mostly failing.

In the beginning, when Nyssa had found her half-dead and starving, she'd been an instrument of death, her father's tool who had finally had the chance to save a life instead of take one. Maybe that's still what she's trying to do.

"Because I can't bear to lose myself," Sara answers her. "I have killed so many people. I have done so many unforgivable things. I can't add this to them. I won't."

"Malcolm Merlyn is due the sword of justice," Nyssa says firmly. "You cannot convince me that you feel otherwise. His crimes are as numerous as they are horrific and he has blatantly violated our code."

"But this isn't just about Malcolm Merlyn," Sara points out. "It's about Thea. And it's about Ollie, now. And they don't deserve the League's brand of justice."

Nyssa hisses at that, her lips curling in distaste as she turns and walks to the dilapidated sofa, looking every bit the cornered wild animal. It's entrancing to Sara. Always has been. Quiet, barely restrained strength is apparently a thing for her, if you look at her track record.

"You know our practices. Malcolm Merlyn knew our practices. He did not go into this blind," Nyssa points out. "He knew well what the fallout would be before he even began plotting his Undertaking."

"He did," Sara agrees. "But Thea didn't. Neither did Oliver. Hasn't that family been through enough?"

"I appreciate your loyalty to them, my beloved," Nyssa tells her. "It speaks volumes of your character."

"A character you love," Sara points out, taking a couple of steps toward Nyssa.

Nyssa looks back at her, her gaze simultaneously full of warning and longing. It's a look Sara knows well, though she's not seen it on her lover's face in some time. This is how it began, really. Nyssa is bound by blood and culture to a life she never chose. She adheres to it out of necessity and obedience to her father, but she wants more from her life than that. Even if it scares her. Especially if it scares her. And Sara… Sara embodies that life that Nyssa has never been allowed. She personifies everything Nyssa craves.

"My father cares not for that," Nyssa points out.

"Don't you think it's time that you start making choices for yourself instead of following what he would have you do?" Sara asks her.

"I was born into the League. I live for the League. I will die for the League," Nyssa says, sounding resigned and rehearsed. "I have no choice of my own."

"Sure you do," Sara counters, slipping her hand into Nyssa's and dragging her thumb across the other woman's wrist. "You have a choice. And I'm asking you to choose me."

Nyssa lets out a strangled noise at this and her eyes slam shut but she doesn't retract her hand from
"I beg of you, do not ask me to choose between you and the League," Nyssa breathes out. "I have neither the strength to walk away from them nor the strength to let you go."

"You're stronger than you think, Nyssa," Sara tells her, leaning in and kissing the assassin delicately, almost chastely.

It doesn't matter how gentle and seemingly innocent things are between them, there is always fire beneath. Sara feels Nyssa's breath catch against her lips and her pulse speed up beneath the gentle press of her fingers against the dark-haired woman's wrist.

"I shall never be strong enough to let you go, Ta-er al-Sahfer," Nyssa says against her lips, twining the fingers of her free hand tightly in Sara's long blonde hair.

"Good," Sara says, smiling against the other woman's mouth. "I was hoping you'd say that."

They fall together, as they so often do in these stolen moments away from the League, away from the world. They love each other madly, deeply, but there is also more to it than that. Being with Nyssa reminds Sara that someone has seen her at her worst and still found her worth saving. Being with Sara reminds Nyssa that there is more to her than just the blood that stains her hands. There is also this. There is also them. An identity they've chosen that has nothing at all to do with circumstances forced upon them. There is no sinking ship here. No birthright to an archaic cult of killers. Sara might well be the only part of Nyssa's life that she's ever chosen for herself and Nyssa... Nyssa might well be the only part of being in the League that has let Sara hold on to her own humanity.

They are a frenzy of lips and touch, skin on skin with the measured delicateness of earlier falling away swiftly. Sometimes, things are slow and teasing between them, almost lazy. It turns that way when they have days or weeks on end together. But the first time is always like this. There's a frenzy to them, a longing and desperation borne of forced separation. And it never takes long before Sara is choking on Nyssa name, her back arching off whatever flat surface they've found and her hands tangled in Nyssa's long, dark hair.

Light is streaming through the windows by the time they're both collapsed against the musty sheets. Nyssa runs her lips along Sara's shoulder, soft even strokes that speak volumes of Nyssa's inability to put distance between them. Her fingers trace the line of Sara's hip in similar fashion, the slow drag of fingers against her skin sending little shoots of electricity through Sara's skin, even though she's thoroughly sated.

"Was this you choosing me?" Sara finally ventures, unable to look at Nyssa or keep the hopefulness out of her tone.

"For the moment," Nyssa murmurs against her skin.

"I want more than this with you," Sara tells her. "You know that, right?"

"I do," Nyssa tells her, face upturned to look in Sara's eyes as she responds. "I wish I were as free as you in choosing things for myself. I envy that in you."

"I wish you saw yourself like I see you," Sara tells her, pushing the hair back from her face and stroking her cheek. "You're strong, Nyssa. You're the strongest person I've ever known."

"And yet you make me weak," she replies.

"Love isn't weakness," Sara tells her.
Nyssa hums sadly in a way that really isn't agreement.

"I'm so sorry, beloved," she says mournfully.

Sara opens her mouth to question her lover's words when she feels a sharp pinch on her hip. She looks down instead of speaking and spies the telltale edge of a tranquilizer dart sticking out of her side.

"Nyssa…" Sara starts, her eyes suddenly feeling heavy.

"Love is most certainly a weakness," Nyssa tells her. "And I hate that I have to use ours against you. But I will not see you sacrificed in the quest for Malcolm Merlyn's justice."

"You won't get to Oliver," Sara tells her, her tongue feeling heavy and her words starting to slur. "And you won't get through him to Thea, either."

"I don't intend to," Nyssa tells her, stroking her face gently as either an apology or a goodbye. "But there are others beyond Oliver Queen who share Thea Queen's blood."

"Malcolm Merlyn has another child?" Sara asks, because none of this is making sense to her.

"No," Nyssa says, obvious regret shading her voice. "Not Malcolm."

"Surely Moira didn't…" Sara starts, but the words drift off as she starts fading towards oblivion.

"The child is not Moira's either," Nyssa tells her.

Sara's mind is quickly shutting down, but she has just enough left in her to suss this out. If Thea has more family and it's not a sibling through either of her parents, then that only leaves… Her eyes widen as everything clicks into place.

"Oliver?" She slurs out. "Nyssa… you can… can't…"

"Sleep well, beloved," Nyssa tells her as the world fades to black and the darkness swallows Sara whole.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Author's Notes - First of all, I am behind on replying to reviews and I very much apologize for that. Secondly, I wanted to address something about the plot... there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye at this point, a lot of which has nothing at all to do with Connor. Some people were pretty put off by the inclusion of Connor in this story. And they're entitled to feel that way, obviously. But I wanted to make very clear that this is in no way a kid!fic. I am interested in what Connor's existence means for the characters I already care about; I have very little interest in Connor himself as a person. He's 10. There's nothing interesting about ten-year-olds. But, regardless of that, at it's core, this story is not about Connor. Though, frankly, you're probably not gonna see the core of the plot start to come into focus until the end of chapter four, so it's understandable people might be assuming that at this point.

It's nearly dark by the time Oliver makes it back to Queen Consolidated, though he'd be hard pressed to remember what he had done for most of the day, if asked. After leaving Laurel at the coffee shop, he'd wandered aimlessly for a bit, seeing little and interacting with people even less. Now, walking back in the doors to his own apartment, he feels no more settled than when he'd left.

"Hey," Felicity greets him, standing immediately from their sofa.

John's there too, Oliver notes. His one-time bodyguard sitting with his elbows resting heavily on his knees and looking up at him with a grim look of sympathy. There's no mistaking that he knows what's going on and, as much as Oliver doesn't mind him knowing and is almost glad to not have to be the one to tell him, it's a pretty startling realization.

"I tripped," Felicity says, seemingly apropos of nothing but looking thoroughly apologetic. "I didn't say anything. Digg came over because he was worried when I told him to take the day off - because, seriously, when do we do that? - and I tripped and I knocked the envelope off the coffee table and the pictures fell out. And then it was just… it was pretty obvious."

She's gesturing towards the table and, for the first time since walking in the room, he realizes there are a half-dozen glossy photographs staring up at him.

"Oh my God," he breathes out.

Felicity's holding his hand all of the sudden, in solidarity or for support, but his other hand immediately goes for the pictures, because he can't not.

"He looks exactly like my mom," Oliver says quietly.
And he does. He's every inch Moira Queen's grandson. He's all sandy hair and wide blue eyes and broad smiles with a square jaw. It's striking. And utterly undeniable.

"You okay?" Felicity asks him as he lets go of her hand but not the pictures he's picked up and sinks down onto the sofa.

"I'm really not," Oliver replies.

"Maybe not. But you will be," Digg tells him and Oliver can feel the other man's eyes on him, the weight of his stare.

"I'm having a really hard time seeing how that's true right now, John," Oliver tells his friend, still not looking at him.

"That's because you're too busy blaming yourself," Digg tells him knowingly.

"Of course I am," Oliver says, finally looking at the other man. "It's my fault. I failed my son. How is that something that I'm ever going to be okay with?"

"You didn't fail your son, Oliver," Digg says, shaking his head with a grim smile.

"He lives in Central City," Felicity says, settling into the sofa next to Oliver and curling her legs underneath her. "Pamela included some information about him in the envelope. Things he likes. Sports he plays. How he does in school. That kind of thing."

"Central City isn't that far," Oliver says absently, looking back at a picture of his son, wide toothy grin on the boy's face and bright blue eyes alight as he proudly holds up a fish he caught.

"It's not," Felicity agrees, leaning into him. "Does that mean you're thinking about being a part of his life?"

"I… yeah," Oliver says, looking toward Felicity.

"Good," Felicity tells him.

"You're okay with that? Really?" Oliver asks skeptically.

"Am I thrilled that you had a kid with another woman? Not really. And, honestly, this brings more complications to our lives which we really don't need," Felicity admits. "But, Oliver… I grew up without my dad. I can't tell you how much I would have loved for him to walk through the door and tell me he'd always wanted to be there for me but something kept us apart. Connor deserves that. And, anyhow, he's your son. I'm pretty sure that means he's gonna be kinda great."

"You really are remarkable, you know?" He murmurs.

"So I've been told," she smiles back.

"So what's the next step?" Digg asks, drawing the couple's attention back to him.
"I'll call Sandra, I guess," Oliver says. "First I want to talk to my lawyers, though. I should change
my will, set up a trust. And I want to get an idea of what we could be facing legally if she doesn't
want me involved in Connor's life."

"Is now really the best time for that?" Digg asks cautiously. "With the League after Thea and
Malcolm?"

"The League's been after Thea and Malcolm for eight months now," Oliver points out. "There's
never going to be a good time."

"You have a lot of enemies, Oliver," Digg adds. "Both as Oliver Queen and as the Arrow. We're
gonna have a hell of a time protecting this kid."

"You're worried about Waller knowing," Oliver states.

"Amongst others," Digg agrees. "We both know she's not above threatening family members to get
someone to do what she wants. And the League knows who you are. If they find out about
Connor..."

Oliver makes a noise of frustration at that. Because he's right. And that makes things so much more
complicated.

"I'll wait to make any moves until we've settled this business with the League, but I'm not bowing
out because of Waller," Oliver tells him. "If she so much as breathes in his direction..."

The threat goes unfinished, but that's okay because it's perfectly clear what he means. The surest way
for anyone to put themselves in Oliver's sights is to threaten someone he loves. And, even though
he's never even met Connor, there's no question that he's very suddenly appeared near the top of the
list of people Oliver would kill for.

"We should call Barry," Felicity pipes up, earning Oliver's attention. "Central City? We might not be
there, but he is. He can check in on Connor for us. Help keep him safe if we get wind of a threat."

"I'll call him tomorrow," Oliver agrees. "I want to talk to Thea before I tell anyone else. I sent her a
message to come home."

"You sure that was a good idea?" Digg questions.

"No," Oliver replies. "But I'm done running. I want her home."

"What's your plan for the League, then?" Felicity asks. "Because I'm pretty sure asking them nicely
to please not hurt your sister isn't gonna work. Though, to be fair, we haven't tried..."

"Waller won't help, but Anatoly might," Oliver tells her.

"You want to pit the Bratva against the League of Assassins?" Digg asks disbelievingly.

"I want enough muscle on our side that the League thinks twice about exactly how much they want
my sister," Oliver tells him. "And, yes, if it comes down to fighting the League for my sister's life, I
will absolutely pit any resources we have against them."

"You sure that isn't just going to create more problems?" Digg questions, his tone heavy and
unconvinced.

"No," Oliver replies bluntly. "But we're running low on options."
"That's... less than reassuring," Felicity sighs.

"Maybe, but it's honest. I gave up on lying to you years ago," Oliver tells her pointedly. "People kept telling me I wasn't very good at it."

Felicity huffs a little laugh and tilts her head in acknowledgement. Even in the darkest of moments these days, there is this. There is lightness and comfort and home. Because that's what Oliver is to her, that's what they are to each other. And they will get through this - through Ra's al Ghul coming after Thea and the discovery of a secret child and pitting the Russian mob against the League of Assassins - because there's also this between them. It grounds them. Reminds them why they're fighting. Why it's worth it.

And it is so very worth it.

"You set up a meeting with Anatoly yet?" Digg asks, dragging Oliver's attention away from Felicity.

"He's going to be in Starling later this week anyhow. We already arranged to meet for drinks," Oliver tells him. "He knows there's something I want to talk with him about, but he doesn't know what yet."

"Don't take this the wrong way, Oliver," Felicity starts warily. "But should we be concerned about him being in town? I mean, he does lead the Russian mob and, personal ties aside, we do fight crime in this city."

"You have a point," he acknowledges. "But that's not what this is this time. He's coming to reign in some of his men who've been... straying outside his directives. He's not expanding his influence. He knows this is our city."

The way he says it sends a little shiver up Felicity's spine. She's pretty sure she doesn't want to know how Anatoly is going to reign in his men. She's almost positive it's the sort of thing that would give her nightmares. For all of the Russian mobster's broad smiles and welcoming gestures, there's something terrifying behind his boisterous laughter. She knows he and Oliver are intensely loyal to each other. And she's grateful for that, really she is, but it doesn't make her any more at ease around Anatoly.

"Oliver, how are-"

Felicity's words are cut off by a sharp, insistent knock on their door.

"I got it," Oliver says, placing his hand on Felicity's knee as she goes to stand.

Felicity isn't sure who she expected to see when Oliver opened the door, but Laurel wasn't it. And yet, there she is. She breezes past Oliver though, without so much as a hello, and eyes Felicity with concern that's frankly a little startling.

"You're okay," are the first words out of Laurel's mouth as she surveys Felicity.

"Well, I skinned my elbow earlier when I tripped on something, but other than that..." Felicity says slowly as she tries to make sense of this.

"What's going on, Laurel?" Oliver asks.

"I got a message from Sara," Laurel tells him, turning to look at Oliver and handing him her cell phone.
Oliver's eyes skim the screen and something darkens dramatically in his eyes at whatever he finds, his shoulders bunching and muscles tensing in a way that Felicity knows means he's primed for a fight.

"What?" Felicity asks, eyes darting between Oliver and Laurel. "What happened?"

Oliver silently passes her the phone. She can feel Digg looking over her shoulder as she reads Sara's words on the screen. All too soon, the dark look on Oliver's face makes a great deal of sense.

League coming, the phone says. Protect Felicity at all costs. I'll be there soon.

"Me?" Felicity asks, staring blankly at the screen. "Why me? How do I help them get to Malcolm Merlyn? I probably dislike him just as much as they do and it's not like he cares at all about me."

"I don't know. But it doesn't matter," Oliver says as Digg makes a noise of agreement from Felicity's side. "If the League has decided to come after you, we have a whole new set of problems."

"I called Roy," Laurel tells them. "He'll be here soon and I gave my father and Bryce a heads-up that the League is headed to town."

"The police won't be able to do anything against the League," Oliver points out.

"The League is full of skilled fighters, but they aren't immune to bullets, Oliver," Laurel reminds him. "Everyone is vulnerable to a well-aimed shot."

She's not wrong. Really, she's not, but Oliver seriously doubts Lance or Bryce will ever have the opportunity to take that shot. Not against Ra's. Or Nyssa. Or anyone else the loyal to the League. They're too good for that.

"When's Anatoly in town?" Digg asks.

"Thursday," Oliver tells him, obviously displeased that it's not now. "But I expect Sara will be back by tomorrow. We'll know more about what's going on then. Until she's here..."

He stares at Felicity heavily as his voice trails off and there's a whole conversation that happens between their eyes. He's caught between pleading and demanding with no small edge of fear tingling his gaze. She knows what he wants and she gets it. She does. She just also sort of hates it.

"I'll stay in the apartment," she concedes. "For now. I won't hide out indefinitely, Oliver. I won't live my life like that forever."

"But at least until Sara gets here?" He asks.

"Yeah," she agrees.

"Thank you," he breathes out in relief and she can see as his body relaxes some at her response.

"You aren't going to leave my side, are you?" She asks, already knowing the answer. "Even if I'm literally staying in our room."

"Yeah, not a chance," Oliver tells her.

"Me either," Digg tells her, to her surprise.

"Digg-" She starts.
"Not negotiable, Felicity," Digg tells her, trading conspiratorial looks with Oliver. "I'm not going anywhere. Not if the League is after you. I've got your back. No arguments."

"Well okay, then, but if you wake up with a sore back because our guest bed is exactly as comfortable as the floor, you can blame Oliver for that," Felicity tells him.

"It's… seriously?" Oliver asks, blinking at her in surprise. "We're talking about this again? Who doesn't like a firm mattress?"

"Anyone who wants a good night's sleep on something other than a rock," Felicity tells him saucily.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Digg tells her with amusement. "Can't be as bad as the cots we slept on in Afghanistan."

"You say that now…" She replies with raised eyebrows, to which he simply shakes his head.

"I'm going to go call Lyla, let her know what's going on," Digg tells them, standing and gesturing toward their kitchen. "ARGUS might be little help, but she's got friends who can at least keep an eye on the building, systems that can watch for signs the League is in town."

"Good," Oliver tells him before turning to Laurel. "Can you contact your father and Bryce? Ask them to up patrols in the area? You're right. It can't hurt. And… and contact Sin. If Sara contacts her or she hears anything, I want to know immediately."

"You got it," Laurel replies, taking her phone back from Felicity who seemed to have forgotten she was holding it still before turning to leave. "I'll check in later."

"Thank you, Laurel," Oliver tells her as she goes, acknowledging him only with a nod, leaving Felicity and Oliver alone.

"What are you going to have Roy do?" Felicity asks curiously.

"He'll fit on the sofa," Oliver says bluntly.

"Oliver! You are not making Roy sleep on our couch," Felicity argues.

"I'm not going to make him do anything," Oliver agrees. "He'll offer. I guarantee it. We all want you safe, Felicity."

"Well so do I," she agrees. "Big fan of the not being kidnapped and tortured plan, but doesn't this all seem like overkill? If the League really wants to get me…"

"Then they'll have to go through us," Oliver tells her fiercely. "I don't know why the League is after you, but if they think they can have you, they're wrong. I am done with them threatening the people I love. You. Thea. I'm done. So if I have to have our team stay here a few nights to keep you safe or if I have to use the Bratva to fight the League or if I have to work with Malcolm Merlyn to burn Nanda Parbat to the ground, I will. Because this needs to end. Now."

There's an edge of insistence and desperation to his voice that she hadn't expected, but probably should have, and it gives her pause. He's had a hell of a day, really, the weight of learning about Connor's existence and about the League coming after her adding to the ever-present stress of knowing Thea is in danger. Honestly, she should have expected this breaking point to hit sooner, but now that it's here, now that she sees in his eyes the resolve to end this fight with the League, she knows this is all coming to a head sooner rather than later.
"Okay," she acquiesces softly.

She gets it. She does. There's only just so much any one person can take.

She stands up, wraps her arms around his middle and leans her head against his chest. His body curls into her, relaxing measurably at her touch. This is their touchstone, the eye in the storm brewing overhead. Whatever turmoil swirls in their lives, they still have this. And that, she realizes, is precisely what has him so terrified right now. And it is terror, in spite of the fierce front he's putting up. The thought of losing her, losing this, has him so scared that he's ready to snap.

"You aren't going to lose me," she murmurs.

There's a quiet noise from him that she probably wouldn't have heard at all if her ear weren't pressed to his chest, a pained catch of his breath at the words being spoken out loud.

"You know that right?" she asks, looking up at him.

"I know," he says, kissing her forehead.

There are words he's not saying though and she hears them as loudly as if he's spoken them. He won't lose her because the only way the League will get to her is through him. He would die before letting them take her. Maybe that thought should be comforting, but it's not. It's not just herself she worries about. She refuses to lose him, too.

It's nearly dawn when Thea and Malcolm turn up on Oliver and Felicity's doorstep, but no one was asleep anyhow. They're all on edge and over-caffeinated with weapons at the ready, half expecting the League to pop out of the shadows at any given moment. Felicity's systems haven't given any sign that the League is in town, but that hasn't done anything to put anyone at ease.

After all, they didn't show that Malcolm Merlyn was back in town, either.

How, exactly, the mass murderer and wanted felon got into Queen Consolidated and up to the penthouse apartments without security noticing is both unclear and a serious cause for concern. Still… in spite of Malcolm's presence, Oliver's immediate reaction is one of relief. He hasn't seen Thea in months and he's so damned glad to see her in person that everything else sort of fades into the background.

For the moment, anyhow.

"Speedy," he says with sigh and a smile, drawing his little sister into a hug. "How are you?"

"Glad to be home. Though, this is more of a reunion than I expected," she tells him, looking past him to Digg and Roy and Felicity. "Still, I'm glad to be off of boats. I hate boats."

"I can't say that I'm terribly fond of them these days either," he says dryly.

"Missed you, big bro," she says, shoving at his shoulder affectionately. "So… did you call me back for a Team Arrow sleepover?"
"What? No. That's... no," Oliver tells her, giving her an incredulous look that only an older brother can really pull off.

"You've risked a great deal by summoning her," Malcolm says, arms folded as he stands near the doorway with Digg and Roy openly watching him with their hands on their weapons.

"We risked a lot by having you keep her hidden for the last eight months, too," Felicity points out, her small frame positively swimming in pyjamas that used to be a shirt of Oliver's in a previous life. "It's not exactly like you're reliable. Or moral. Or sane."

"Charming as always, Miss Smoak," he replies tightly.

"Don't fight," Thea orders, though it's not really clear which one of them she's talking to.

They both listen, though. Felicity drifts closer to Digg while Malcolm stands pridefully near the door. It's a truce, of sorts. For now, anyhow.

"We're... all on edge. We've had word that the League is targeting Felicity," Oliver tells his sister.

"That doesn't make any sense," Malcolm says, suddenly looking very invested in the conversation.

"I know," Oliver agrees. "But this comes from Sara."

"Why would the League target Felicity?" Thea puzzles. "She and Malcolm literally have no connection to each other."

"They wouldn't," Malcolm announces firmly. "Sara's wrong. I know Ra's. Going after Felicity would do nothing to me and it would hurt his cause by making a more serious enemy out of you. He's vengeful and cunning, but he's not stupid. He's not going to target her. Not to get to me."

"What if he's trying to get to Thea?" Roy offers up. "She cares about Felicity."

"This is the League of Assassins," Malcolm tells him patronizingly. "That's not how they work. They care about blood. If they wanted to draw Thea into the open by hurting someone she cares about, they'd go after you."

"We're missing something," Digg says shaking his head at Oliver.

"Is this why you called us home?" Thea asks, drawing Oliver's tense gaze back to her.

"No, that's..." Oliver pauses mid-sentence, looks sightlessly over Thea's head and blinks several times in quick succession before regrouping. "That's something else. We should talk."

"O... kay?" Thea says warily, looking up at him with suspicion.

"Not here," he tells her. "Come on."

He shoots a nervous look towards Felicity as he leads his sister back toward their office. She smiles and nods at him in quiet support. She can't imagine how he's feeling right now. The past 24-hours have really been a lot to handle and she frankly can't wait until this latest crisis is behind them and they can just be for a bit. He needs that. Hell, they both do.

"I'm gonna make more coffee," she says after an awkward moment of silence.

"I'll come with you," Roy says immediately, obviously grateful to put some space between himself and Malcolm.
Digg just nods, his impressive arms folded in front of him as he stands facing Malcolm. For his part, Malcolm looks wholly unimpressed. But Digg is on alert. Of course he is.

"How you holding up?" Roy asks as Felicity closes in on her coffee maker, dumps the dredges and works on making a new pot.

"Still standing," she replies. "You know, figuratively as well as literally."

"And Oliver?" Roy asks.

"He's... had better days," Felicity acknowledges with a sigh.

"He's had worse ones, too," Roy points out.

Correctly.

There's literally no debating this. Felicity hums in agreement and watches as the coffee starts filling the pot.

"Having Thea home will do him good," Felicity notes. "If we can keep her safe, that is."

"We will," Roy says firmly.

Felicity has no doubt that he means it. Wholeheartedly. He and Thea might not be together these days, but the feelings between the two of them have obviously never waned. It's not something Roy talks about. He's not that kind of guy. But there's a look he gets when Thea's name gets brought up, a pained expression when he catches sight of a picture of her, a way he stares at empty spaces around Verdant where he once saw her all the time.

Felicity knows. All of them know.

"We will," Felicity agrees, gripping his forearm tightly in solidarity before reaching for a coffee mug. She stops mid-reach, though, at a commotion from back in the living room. Roy's hand is on his weapon and he's got his body between Felicity and the noise before she can even blink, but it's not the League that rounds the corner into the kitchen. Or Malcolm.

No, it's Sara.

"You're okay?" the erstwhile assassin asks in a strange mimicry of her sister the day before.

"Well I'm tired and bordering on a caffeine overdose at this point, but other than that..." Felicity says, voice trailing off at the end as everyone else piles into the kitchen behind Sara.

"Should you... Felicity, you probably shouldn't be having that much caffeine," Sara says cautiously.

"I'm about twelve kinds of confused right now," Felicity says, brow furrowed. "Which is strange and uncomfortable. I think I dislike it."

"Sara, what's going on?" Oliver asks firmly.

"The League realized they're getting nowhere by going after Thea and Malcolm directly, so they've decided to go after someone else who shares Thea's blood to get at her," Sara says, watching Felicity as she speaks.

"They're coming after me?" Oliver asks.
"No," Sara says decisively. "Not you. Someone easier to get access to."

Maybe it's the way Sara's gaze lingers on Felicity, some combination of intense, worried and knowing. Maybe it's that his head was in a similar place a week or so ago. But, whatever the reason, it occurs to Oliver suddenly and clearly exactly what Sara is implying.

"You think she's pregnant," Oliver says, no question in his tone.

"She's not?" Sara asks in surprise, looking back and forth between them.

But Felicity's too caught up in what this all means to respond directly. Her mind has jumped several steps ahead of them both and connected the dots and her realization socks the wind right out of her. Oliver's only a second behind her in figuring it all out. Felicity watches as the blood drains from his face, leaving him ashen and as terrified as she can ever remember seeing him.

"Connor," he says simply. "They're going after-

"Oh my God," says Thea, stumbling a step toward Malcolm. "They can't. They wouldn't."

"They would," Malcolm counters as Digg sucks in a breath between his teeth and Roy stiltedly reaches towards Thea before pulling his hand back awkwardly. "They will.'

"Felicity…" Oliver says brokenly.

"Already calling Barry," Felicity tells him, phone pressed to her ear.

"Who the hell is Connor?" Sara asks in confusion.

"My son," Oliver says measuredly. "The League of Assassins is going after my son."
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Felicity's on the phone, pacing in their kitchen so quickly and repetitively that it's sort of amazing she isn't wearing a groove in the stone tiles. Roy's saying something to Thea, whose shell-shocked face gives every indication that she's not hearing him at all. And Sara is verbally sparring with Malcolm, both of them tense and confrontational. But, Oliver hears exactly none of it. It's all white noise in the background of this overwhelming, unthinkable development.

"Oliver."

It's Digg's voice that brings him back to the present, back to the here-and-now where his son needs him and there's work to be done. Oliver blinks a few times to center himself and clear his vision before nodding to Digg.

"No, Caitlin, that's not…" Felicity is saying.

The frustration in her voice barely over-powers the worry behind her words and Oliver knows - without a doubt - that whatever she's hearing isn't good.

"Yeah. That's… Damn it... Yeah, thank you. I appreciate it. I'll call you back, Cait," she says, ending the call and turning to Oliver.

"What?" Oliver asks, barely able to get the word out but incapable of not asking.

"Barry's unavailable. She didn't get into specifics. But even if he weren't, we're too late," she tells him, eyes watery and blinking too rapidly. "It's all over the news in Central City. The League grabbed him overnight."

She moves like she's considering hugging him, comforting him, something, but he holds up a hand and she stills instead. His fingers curl into a white-knuckled fist of their own accord. He's not in a place where he can accept affection right now, not when his first instinct towards everything is guilt. He'll get past it. He's grown over the past year. But right now he needs to work his way through the self-blame first.

Thea, who has always paid little heed to Oliver's need for space, closes her fingers around his elbow. He stiffens visibly, but Oliver will never push his sister away, not even when it screams from every instinct he has that he should.

"Ollie… what are we going to do?" she asks him, looking up at him with wet eyes and so much trust.

"Whatever we have to," Oliver responds thickly.

"Thea, I'm going to check the news footage to see if there's anything there that might help us. Can you give me a hand?" Felicity asks the girl.

"I… sure, but Ollie-" Thea starts, looking between them in surprise.

"I just… give me a few minutes, okay?" Oliver says, lips twisted into something poorly resembling a smile.
"Yeah… sure," Thea says, letting go of his arm.

Oliver stalks back towards the bedroom the moment Thea's hand is off of him. There's a giant crash from that direction a moment later and long string of what must be Russian curse words.

"I really hope that wasn't that vase I like," Felicity sighs.

"Do you actually need my help looking through news footage?" Thea asks her skeptically.

"If you want to push the button that starts the program that does that for us, you can. That'd be helpful," Felicity tells the other girl, holding out her cell phone.

"How did the League even know about this kid?" Roy asks, out of the blue, drawing everyone's attention to him. "I mean, Oliver didn't even know until yesterday."

"A very good question," Digg notes. "The League finds out about Connor at the same time Oliver does? I don't buy that's a coincidence."

"How did Oliver find out?" Malcolm asks.

"Pamela, the QC public relations director. She knew the whole time because of Moira," Felicity says. "But she's incredibly discrete. She wouldn't tell anyone."

"Does this really matter right now?" Thea asks. "The League knows. They have my nephew. How they found out is a problem for another day."

"She's right," Malcolm chimes in, as Thea's eyes narrow in her father's direction. "We need to be focused on what we do next."

"We question why you are suddenly considering yourself a part of the team," Felicity tells Malcolm.

"Now is not the time for pettiness, Miss Smoak," Malcolm says disdainfully.

"No, but it's totally the time for caution. I don't trust you," she tells him.

"Which proves you have an excellent sense of self-preservation," Malcolm acknowledges. "But my interests in this and yours align. The League took my daughter's nephew to draw her out into the open so they can grab her to make me suffer. We need to unseat Ra's, for all our sakes."

"Haven't you been paying attention?" Digg asks with annoyance. "We can't take down Ra's. We don't have the manpower to take down the League. We storm Nanda Parbat and we die there."

"We don't need to destroy the League to end it's threat against us," Malcolm tells him. "We simply need to replace the current Ra's."

"You want to replace him," Sara says astutely. "With yourself. Of course you do."

"I… would humbly offer myself up to take his place," Malcolm tells her.

"Yeah," Felicity scoffs. "Because there's a world where I'll sit back happy to see you take over as the head of the League of Assassins. You already tried to level half the city once and you did that without a stealthy ninja army at your command."

"Do you honestly think there's anything Oliver wouldn't do to save his son? Even if that means leaving the League in my hands?" Malcolm asks with an air of disbelief.
"You don't just want us safe," Thea realizes, taking a step away from him. "You want control of the League. God. That's probably been your goal all along. No wonder Ra's wants you out of the way. You're a threat to him."

"My goal is to see my family safe," Malcolm tells her. "Becoming the Demon's Head would surely achieve that."

"Sometimes I almost forget what a self-serving monster you really are," Thea tells him. "Then you remind me… so vividly. Every time."

"Hate me if you must, Thea. But I am your father and I love you. I only want for us to be safe. So, regardless of how you feel about me, you need to work with me," Malcolm tells her.

Thea makes a noise of disgust and turns away from him, finding herself face-to-face with Roy, who rests a solid, protective hand on her shoulder while glaring past her to Malcolm.

"Where are we at?" Oliver asks, reentering the room and flexing his hand like his knuckles maybe hurt.

"We're at the part where we distrust everything out of Malcolm's mouth," Thea says bitterly.

"We're nowhere," Roy adds.

"Not exactly…" Sara announces.

Everyone turns to her, waits for her to explain. The look on her face is anything but happy and yet, she continues on anyhow.

"Nyssa is the one who grabbed Connor. I'm sure of it," Sara tells Oliver. "It's why I thought Felicity was in danger. Something Nyssa said… well, anyhow, she made it clear that the League knew about Oliver having a child. I'm sure she's the one who took him."

"How much influence do you have over her?" Oliver asks blatantly.

"Not enough. She drugged me right before she told me," Sara admits. "She's a good person, Ollie. She is. She's just… she's never known anything other than the League and her father is a terrifying, controlling man. No one refuses an order from Ra's."

"She kidnapped a ten-year-old from his own bedroom," Oliver snaps back.

"Look, Ollie, I know Nyssa. How she thinks. How she operates. I can find her," Sara says confidently.

"Do it," Oliver damn near growls.

Sara nods sharply and looks to Felicity, "I'll need a computer."

"You can use Bullseye… She's the one in the office with the smallest monitor," Felicity tells the other woman. "The others are running scans or updates right now. Let me know if you need anything."

"Got it," Sara says, heading out of the kitchen.

"I'll go suit up," Roy says.

"I'm gonna check in with Lyla. See if she has any intel for us," Digg announces. "Maybe someone's
got eyes on Nyssa."

The two men leave the kitchen and Felicity turns to Oliver with a hesitant look on her face.

"We need to tell Pamela," she tells him. "If the League found out somehow, someone else could have too and if it hits the press…"

"Yeah," Oliver acknowledges. "Yeah that's… call her, please. And let her know I'm going to want to talk to her later. The League found out about Connor somehow and I want to know how."

"You got it," she tells him, squeezing his hand and kissing his cheek before turning to walk out of the room in the same direction Digg and Roy had gone.

But she stops mid-stride, freezing in place as the pieces of *something* fall together in her mind. Her faces turns ashen all of the sudden and her eyes catch Oliver's, wide and worrying.

"What?" He asks in confusion and concern. "Felicity, what's wrong?"

She opens her mouth like she's going to say something to him, but the words don't seem to form. Instead, her gaze darts to Malcolm, distrust and no small amount of anger shading her eyes.

"How did you know?" She asks sharply after a moment.

"Know what?" Malcolm asks with obviously thin patience.

"About Connor," Felicity demands, feeling Oliver tense behind her. "You shouldn't have known. No one told you, but when Thea said that they wouldn't go after him, you said they would. You *knew*.

"You really are very clever, Miss Smoak," Malcolm smirks.

"You son of a bitch," Oliver breathes stalking towards the other man.

"You need me," Malcolm points out, stepping backwards a foot or so with his hand raised in front of him.

Oliver stops in his tracks, looking no less like a predator about to strike but showing enough restraint that he's willing to listen.

"No one knows Ra's like I do," Malcolm points out with certainty. "Sara was a barely-tolerated foot soldier. I was his right-hand man for years. I know how he fights, how he thinks, and there's more at play here than we've seen yet."

"I say we take our chances," Felicity grits out from behind Oliver, Thea nodding along with her in agreement.


"Don't you dare invoke my name to protect yourself," Thea hisses at her father.

"You did this. You did all of this," Felicity accuses Malcolm. "You told the League. You put Connor in danger in the first place. There is nothing, nothing you can say that will ever make us trust you."

"Why would I tell the League about Connor?" Malcolm asks. "What could I possibly gain from that?"
"When does anything not go according to your master plan?" Thea asks.

"You're giving me more credit than I'm due," Malcolm tells her. "I'm **adaptable**. It's helped me survive. But that doesn't mean that everything that happens is something I've planned. It's not."

Wherever the man goes, trouble follows in his wake. And this… Oliver hadn't realized things could get this bad. It had been hard enough knowing his sister was in danger because of Malcolm's crimes. Knowing his son has been **kidnapped** because of them, even if Malcolm's telling the truth and it's indirectly… That's too much. But, in spite of Felicity's very valid points, Oliver isn't quite sure that Malcolm is entirely **wrong**. Sara's access to Ra's was always limited, but Malcolm...

"If my son is hurt because of you, you won't need to worry about the League," Oliver tells Malcolm seriously, eyes piercing and weighted with meaning. "Are we clear?"

"Oliver!" Felicity objects.

"I don't wish the boy ill, but I've beaten you. Twice. I'm not afraid of you, Oliver," Malcolm tells him confidently.

"**You should be,**" Oliver tells him with terrifying calm.

"Maybe now you have an inkling of why I'm willing to do anything to protect Thea," Malcolm replies.

"You and I are **nothing** alike," Oliver grits out.

"It would be comforting to think so, wouldn't it?" Malcolm asks.

"This is a mistake," Felicity tells Oliver. "The enemy of your enemy can **still be your enemy**."

"He is," Oliver agrees. "But he's also a resource. Ra's is the bigger threat here. And Malcolm can help with that."

"Malcolm Merlyn isn't interested in helping anyone other than **Malcolm Merlyn**," Felicity counters, her tone edging toward her loud voice. "He's a liability, not an asset!"

"He's helping himself by helping us," Oliver tells her.

"For how long?" Felicity cries. "How long until he leaves us hanging when we've relied on him for something? Because that **will** happen, Oliver. He's already killed your best friend, your father, kidnapped your step-father, blackmailed your mother, left you marooned for **years** on an island literally called Purgatory. How many more people have to suffer or die because of this **man** before we learn to stop trusting him?"

She's not wrong. And lining up Malcolm's sins like that is a compelling argument, if a difficult one to hear. But it also doesn't mean that Oliver's wrong, either. He knows this, **knows** it in his bones, they won't be able to defeat Ra's without someone who knows him well at their side.

"I hate to interrupt your lover's quarrel, but we have more important things to focus on than my dubious morality," Malcolm says with airy disdain.

"We do," Thea jumps in before either Felicity or Oliver have a chance to respond. "But know this - father or not, if you betray us? I'll kill you myself."

"I understand. You all want me dead. Can we move on now?" Malcolm asks.
"We're not done talking about this," Felicity tells Oliver, face hard and unyielding.

"I never thought we were," he replies, equally stubborn.

But she drops it. For now.

"I might have something," Sara says, reentering the room and earning everyone's attention.

"You found them?" Oliver asks abruptly.

"Well… maybe," Sara hedges. "Nyssa's covering her tracks and she's doing it well. It's more effort than I'd expect her to give if it was just us she was hiding from. But there are clear signs of her in Coast City, Metropolis and here."

"She's planted decoys?" Felicity asks.

"You can't determine which one is actually her?" Oliver asks.

"No. I can't even promise you that any of them are," Sara admits. "But it's the best lead we've got."

Oliver winces at that but nods after a moment, brow knit and heavy in thought. Felicity's hand settles on his shoulder after a moment of quiet and they look to each other in a moment of quiet sympathy and support. They both know the play here and it's not a great one, but it's their only choice.

"Okay," Oliver sighs. "Sara, head to Metropolis. I'll have Roy and Digg head to Coast City."

"You're splitting up?" Thea asks in surprise.

"We don't have a choice," Oliver tells her. "Which is probably half of the reason why Nyssa used decoys in the first place."

"I want to go with Sara," Thea asserts.

"No," say Oliver and Malcolm nearly in unison, both of them looking somewhat disturbed at their agreement.

"I've been training! I can fight!" Thea insists petulantly. "This is my nephew. He's in danger because shares my blood. I can't just sit this out."

"Thea, the whole point of this is to get to you. We can't risk you in the field," Oliver tells her. "Not just because we need to keep you safe, although we do, but also because… who knows what they'll do to Connor if they actually manage to get you. They won't need him anymore."

Thea looks ready to argue her case right up until Oliver's last statement. At that, her resolve crumbles and the fight seeps out of her.

"There are things you can do here to help," Oliver consoles her. "I'm staying here, too."

She nods at that but says nothing.

"And what, exactly, is your plan for me?" Malcolm asks.

"You're going to stay here and tell me everything you know about Ra's al Ghul," Oliver informs him.

Felicity makes a dissatisfied noise from Oliver's side as Malcolm tilts his head in agreement.
"And you'll be helping to keep Thea safe, since that's just about the only thing I trust you to do," Oliver tells him. "I want you both staying in the tower."

"Is that a good idea? It makes us awfully easy to find," Thea points out.

"It's the most well-protected, easily defended location we have," Oliver replies.

"And yet we waltzed in undetected," Malcolm notes.

"Yeah… we'll be having a talk about that, too," Oliver tells him.

"I'm going to grab a change of clothes and head out," Sara says suddenly. "If Nyssa is already in Metropolis, she's got a hell of a head start and I'm going to have to move quickly."

"Before you go, can you show Felicity and Thea how you tracked her down in the first place? Let them know what signs to look for?" Oliver requests.

"Me?" Thea asks in surprise.

"You wanted to help, Speedy," he tells her. "This is how you can."

"Okay," Thea says, looking somewhat mollified before following the other two women back to Felicity's office.

It's just Oliver and Malcolm, then. Each eyes the other with distrust and wariness. Their alliance, such as it is, is far from ideal and Oliver is well aware that Felicity has some very valid concerns in her opposition to working with Merlyn. Retrospectively, he might even agree with her eventually. But right here, right now, his need for Malcolm's help outweighs his distrust of the other man.

And that's saying a lot.

"I might not agree with Felicity about whether or not we need you, but I also don't trust you," Oliver says bluntly. "She's right about how many people I care about that you've killed or hurt and - Malcolm - you need to know that I won't tolerate any more of my family suffering for your sake."

"I have never wished any ill-will toward your family," Malcolm says with pathological levels of empathy. "I've only ever wanted to protect my own."

"Then I'd suggest you stop making them targets and putting them in danger," Oliver replies shortly.

"Says the man who uses his self-declared family as soldiers in his war against those who wrong the city," Malcolm counters. "What was it you were saying about us being nothing alike?"

"You don't use your family as soldiers, Malcolm," Oliver tells him. "You use them as cannon fodder. And your attempt to save the city amounted to nothing more than homicidal class warfare. You and I? We're nothing alike."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Oliver," Malcolm replies loftily.

"I'm going to call Digg and Roy. Let them know the plan," Oliver says, leaving the topic behind. "Don't go anywhere."

"You're in charge," Malcolm responds with a thin smile.

Lately, Oliver's starting to wonder if that's true.
Nyssa is a ghost. She blinks in and out of existence in Coast City and Metropolis and Starling City and, once, in Gotham. They manage to discount Gotham fairly quickly - travel time alone rules it out as a likely location - but as the day wears on Oliver's frustration level rises considerably.

He stalks around the apartment, looms over Felicity and Thea's shoulders staring at the computer screens impatiently, texts Sara and Digg and Roy with absurd frequency and generally increasingly becomes difficult to deal with.

"That's it," Felicity announces suddenly, rising from her chair and forcing Oliver back a step from where he's been hovering since hanging up the phone with Digg ten minutes prior. "We're going for a walk."

"A walk?" Oliver asks bewildered.

"Yes. You know, outside. Where there's sunshine and fresh air and… space," Felicity replies.

"We don't have time for that!" Oliver insists.

"Us being here isn't going to make these searches run any faster, Oliver, and it's not like they won't notify my phone once they're done anyhow," Felicity reminds him. "Besides, Thea is here to keep an eyes on things. We need to get out of this apartment before you pace a hole through the floor or one of us goes crazy. It's a toss up which would happen first."

"Felicity…" he protests, tension and helplessness beyond evident in his voice and his eyes.

"I get it," she tells him empathetically, tangling their fingers together and squeezing a little. "We've got this covered. We're doing everything we can to find Connor. Let's let the systems do their thing while we take a deep breath and just… be. Get outside. Grab some lunch. Be somewhere other than stuck inside these same four walls all day. You need that."

Some of the tension drains out of him just at the idea and he finds himself nodding in agreement without even realizing it.

"God you're good for him," Thea observes from the computer to Felicity's side. "I didn't think anything short of the building catching on fire was going to get him to stop hovering without a location on Connor."

Felicity can't help but smile a little at the girl's approval. Getting to know Thea is long overdue and she's greatly looking forward to this whole League mess being behind them so she can spend some time with this girl who is so important to Oliver's life.

"Keep an eye on Malcolm?" Oliver requests of his sister, glancing toward the family room where Malcolm is apparently meditating.

"Definitely," Thea confirms.

"We won't be gone long," Felicity tells her. "An hour, tops, but call me if something pings that we aren't expecting, okay?"
"Got it. I'm on it. Now go, get him out of my hair," Thea says, waving her hands in a shooing motion at the couple.

They go, hand-in-hand while Felicity gives Malcolm the stinkeye. He smirks like he sees her while he's meditating but he never even opens his eyes. It really does make her hate him a little more. Stupid Malcolm Merlyn meditating in her family room. Her home has been invaded by evil.

But that's a topic for later, she reminds herself. Oliver's got too much on his plate as it is. She doesn't need to add to it.

The elevator is empty when it arrives. Not surprising, given how few people are supposed to have access to their floor, but it's a welcome sight all the same. Felicity enters first, tugging his fingers to follow her in. As soon as he does, she hits the button to close the doors, then hits the stop button.

"What-" he starts to ask.

She interrupts by wrapping her arms around him and pressing her cheek against his chest. It takes a second, but his hands settle against the curve of her spine and the back of her head, returning the hug. She can feel as some of the tension bleeds out of his frame, the muscles of his back loosen and he drops a kiss on the top of her head.

"You needed a hug," she murmurs into his chest. "I didn't really think you'd want to do this in the lobby, though, so…"

"Thank you," he says into her hair.

She looks up a beat later, rises up on her toes and presses her lips softly to his, a hand reaching up to stroke from his temple to the back edge of his jaw. He leans into her touch after the kiss ends, the scruff of his jaw brushing against the palm of her hand as he curls into her touch and kisses her fingertips.

"We're okay, Oliver," she tells him with more certainty than she knows he will believe. "We'll be okay."

"It's just a lot," he sighs, opening his eyes to lock gazes with her.

"It is," she agrees. "But we'll manage. Like we always do."

"Yeah," he says absently, but he almost sounds like he believes it.

"Come on," she says, stepping back and pressing the ground floor button on the elevator. "Let's go have some lunch, get some air, come at this with fresh eyes in a bit."

"You got it," he tells her with a smile, his hand settling low on her back and stroking against the ridges of her spine like it grounds him. Maybe it does.

The rest of the ride is spent in comfortable silence, just the two of them, close together and willing some sense of calm to settle over their lives.

It almost works, too. Right up until the doors open to the lobby and they find the ground floor of Queen Consolidated in absolute chaos.

They barely manage to get out of the elevator before people shove their way in, trying to escape any which way they can. There's screaming, running, everyone is manic and any measure of calm Oliver had managed to attain very quickly bleeds away.
It's instinctive at this point. He's on edge. Ready to fight. Masked or not.

"What's going-" Felicity starts, but the words die in her throat as the crowds scatter enough for her to see to the middle of the fray.

It's Nyssa. But she's not alone. She's battling one of her father's men. Swords drawn, the two are clashing violently and Felicity is confused because this doesn't make any sense. But that matters very little when her eyes drift to take in the rest of the scene because, not very far away from the dueling assassins stands a very frightened looking young boy.

"Oliver," she says, gripping his arm tightly.

He follows her gaze and she hears the breath catch in his throat at his first sight of Connor, scared but apparently unharmed.

"Get him out of here," Oliver tells her after a beat, blinking hard and forcing himself to look back toward the fight.

"Oliver, you're not-" she starts.

"I don't need the bow," he reminds her.

"You don't have the mask!" she hisses back.

"Just get him out of here," Oliver replies, moving with purpose toward Nyssa and the other assassin.

The lobby is all but empty now, except for them. The police have yet to arrive but the workers have cleared out. Felicity tries not to think about what happened to the security guards. She has a feeling she already knows. It's not like they call them the League of Assassins for nothing, after all.

"Connor!" she shouts, which unfortunately earns the attention of the assassins as well as the boy.

"Protect the boy," Nyssa snaps in her direction, countering a move from the assassin in front of her.

Felicity might not quite understand how Nyssa fits into all this yet - and man does that irk her... she hates a mystery - but she surely agrees with the agenda here. Connor, however, appears to be frozen in fear, his big blue eyes almost comically huge as he watches the battle in front of him.

"Come here," she hisses to him, gesturing for him to come to her.

She has the better vantage point. It's safer, further away from the fighting, but Connor seems reluctant to move.

"I don't even know you," he finally says worriedly. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"I'm all for stranger-danger. Good instinct, but seeing as I'm the one unarmed and not wearing a mask, I feel like maybe that's a vote in my favor at the moment," she tells him before realizing exactly what she's said "Not that all armed people with masks are bad. I mean, obviously there are some really completely wonderful people who might be armed. Or wear masks. Or both."

She's possibly not helping her own case because he's looking at her like she's maybe crazy and - okay, that's fair - but she's a little out of her element at the moment.

"Go to her!" Nyssa shouts as she bends backwards to narrowly avoid the slice of the other assassin's blade.
Connor listens, scurrying along the wall to Felicity's side and breathes a sigh of relief as she pulls him behind her and puts herself between him and the battle going on in front of them.

Even unarmed Oliver is a force to contend with, but so is this assassin. The masked assailant is holding off both Oliver and Nyssa and wow that's a little terrifying. Felicity wants to help. Somehow. But her priority has to be Connor.

"We need to get upstairs," she tells him, holding on to the boy's hand but keeping him behind her.

"What about Nyssa?" Connor asks, drawing Felicity's eyes away from the fighting.

"She can take care of herself," Felicity says slowly, still trying to wrap her head around all of this.

"She's taken care of me," Connor responds. "When he came to take me, she saved me. She said not to leave her side. She said that Al Mobaath would hurt me if he could, but she'd bring me somewhere safe."

_Here_, Felicity realizes. Nyssa was taking him _here_.

"Al Mobaath?" She asks the boy with wary curiosity.

"Him. The Resurrected," he clarifies, pointing toward the assassin with his free hand.

Felicity's eyes go wide as she looks back to the fighting because the story forming in her mind is crazy. It's not even _possible_. Except… except for how it all makes a strange kind of sense.

Oliver's managed to get the assassin's blade away from him. The masked man is on his knees, clearly beaten, his sword-arm visibly broken.

"We must end this," Nyssa tells Oliver. "So long as there is breath in this man's lungs, he shall hunt the boy to the edges of the earth. It is my father's will and he is naught but a vessel for my father's commands."

"Get Connor out of here," Oliver orders gruffly with his eyes fixed on the assailant.

Felicity knows instinctively that despite Oliver's resolution not to kill, this man's life is very much in danger. Oliver killed the Count for threatening her life. He would most definitely kill the man hunting his son. He just doesn't want the boy to see it.

"We need him alive," Felicity cries, knowing in her bones that if she's right, Oliver will never forgive himself for killing this man.

He stays his hand and looks to her in confusion.

"Al Mobaath must die," Nyssa scowls back. "There is no other recourse."

"Take off his mask," Felicity demands.

"It matters not whose face he wears," Nyssa tells her. "There is nothing left of who he was before. Now, there is only this. There is only death and destruction borne of my father's will."

"Take off his mask," Felicity repeats.

Nyssa looks poised to argue but Oliver isn't. He reaches forward, pulls the man's mask down and promptly stumbles backwards several paces, all of the color draining from his face and the sword in his hand falling limply to his side.
"Oh my God," Oliver breathes in shock. "Tommy?"

There is no recognition on the other man's face though, no warmth that shaded Tommy's eyes in this man's gaze.

"Tommy is dead. He exists only in the past. My name is Al Mobaath. And Al Sa-Her will answer to me for his betrayal."

Chapter End Notes

So... *that* happened...
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Probably somewhere between a week and two weeks before the next update for this. Enjoy!

It's Tommy's voice ringing in his ears and Tommy's face just a few paces away from him and Oliver can't make sense of it. Tommy died. He died. Years ago. Oliver had watched the lights fade out of his best friend's eyes. He would have given anything - anything - to bring Tommy back. But, like his mother and his father and Yao Fe and Shado and so many others, Tommy's death was irreversible. Non-negotiable.

The Grim Reaper makes no deals.

Except...

Except… here he is.

He's back. But the shock of that leaves Oliver just off-kilter enough that it takes a few beats for him to recognize that he might not be back entirely.

Oliver's grip on his sword is slackened, like his grip on reality at the moment, and Tommy's movements are swift. Swifter than they ever were in life. Tommy was never a fighter. Not before. But he is now. It's unexpected, in spite of the fact that Oliver has literally been fighting the other man for the past few minutes, and it nearly costs them a great deal.

Tommy wrests the sword from Oliver's loosened fingers with ease. Somewhere in the background, Oliver can hear Felicity scream something incoherent. But it isn't him that Tommy slices the blade back towards.

It's Nyssa.

The sword cuts deeply into the woman's arm, the flow of blood immediate and not insubstantial. She howls in pain and stumbles backwards a few steps, her sword clattering to the ground as she's unable to keep a hold on it. She collapses a few steps from the sword, clutching at her arm and howling in pain, looking more like a wounded animal than anyone Oliver has ever seen.

"NO! Nyssa!" Connor shrieks as he tries to bolt toward the injured woman.

Felicity holds the boy back, pulling him toward her with a vise-like grip and whispering something to him quietly that stills his wiggly attempts to get free. Oliver doesn't have time to wonder what she says, but it's clearly effective because he doesn't fight her at all as she pulls him behind her fully and places herself between him and danger. Between him and Tommy.

He's still shell-shocked, still floored, but the sight of Felicity protectively moving in front of his son jars Oliver into action. Tommy - no… not Tommy, Al Mobaath - takes a step toward Felicity and Connor, but Oliver scrambles to block his path. He doesn't have a plan, is unarmed, can't imagine fighting Tommy, but the need to keep Felicity safe is as instinctive to him as breathing at this point.
Tommy doesn't have the sword raised, though his grip on it is firm and full of intent as he moves toward Felicity and Connor, but he stops short when Oliver blocks his way. His eyes are blank, so blank, so devoid of any sense of emotion and it's that, more than anything else, that makes Oliver wonder if maybe he wasn't wrong in the first place.

Maybe Tommy is dead still, after all.

"Tommy… Al Mobaath," Oliver says, hands raised as he eyes the sword in his one-time best friend's hands. "I'm not going to let you hurt them."

The look of appraisal that Al Mobaath gives him is long and calculating, his head tilted to the side as he considers Oliver and the people he's so desperate to protect. Part of Oliver expects the other man's face to break out into a broad, trickester's grin. If it were Tommy, really Tommy, it would have. He'd have dropped the sword and clapped him on the back and laughed. But this isn't Tommy. Not now. Not really.

There are sirens wailing in the distance, their cry growing closer by the second. Tommy notes it, too. How much of a factor that is in what he ultimately decides to do, Oliver doesn't know.

"Al Sa-Her will pay with blood for his sins," Al Mobaath says grimly. "As will anyone who stands in the way of the the League."

It's emotionless, chilling, and his words resonate to Oliver's very core.

"What happened to you?" Oliver breathes out mournfully. "What happened to my friend?"

"He died," Al Mobaath says decisively. "And in his place, I am born."

It's not an answer. Not really. But it's also not untrue.

Oliver doesn't have time to ask him anything else, though. Maybe it's the sirens closing in, maybe it's Nyssa reaching with her good arm for her fallen sword, or maybe - just maybe - it's some echo of Tommy not wanting to slice his way through an unarmed Oliver. But whatever the reason, Al Mobaath turns and bolts from the building, moving far faster than Oliver has ever seen Tommy move.

He wants to run after him. Wants to grab onto to Tommy and not let go until the other man regains his sense of self and comes back to them, comes home. But Tommy is faster in this life than the last and he gets as far as the door to the lobby before he realizes Tommy is already long gone and Felicity is calling his name.

His obligations are here. With his son and the badly-injured Nyssa who protected him.

"We have to get them upstairs," Oliver tells Felicity, making his way quickly back over to where she's rushed to Nyssa's side.

"She needs a doctor!" Connor says, looking terrified and clutching Nyssa's good hand.

"I have seen far worse injuries than this, little one," Nyssa tells him. "Fear not for me. This wound will not be my end."

The look Felicity shoots him says that Nyssa isn't telling the whole truth here. She will be fine. She will. But that doesn't mean she doesn't need some serious medical attention. Even with all of the blood, Oliver can see that the sword sliced all the way to the bone.
"Give me your shirt," Felicity says.

"I… excuse me?" Oliver asks, blinking at her.

"To wrap around her wound. I need something. And as options go…” she replies, voice trailing off as she looks down at her dress.

"She can have mine!" Connor offers, looking up with watery eyes.

"It's okay, buddy," Oliver tells him as he slips his own henley off and moves to tie it around Nyssa's bloodied arm. "Mine's got more fabric. It'll absorb more."

He misses the way Connor's face falls. He's too busy locking eyes with Nyssa, who nods firmly before he tightens the makeshift bandage around her arm. Her face contorts in pain and beads of sweat break out across her face, color draining from her cheeks as her mouth drops open in a wordless cry.

"She saved me," Connor says a little petulantly, a striking reminder of his age. "I want to help her. I need to help her, too. It's my fault she's hurt."

And… God, of all the things for his son to inherit from him, Connor ends up with a guilt complex and a need to save people. That's just… Oliver can't even think about that right now.

"It's Al Mobaath's fault she's hurt. No one else's," Oliver says crisply, not missing the way Felicity bites her lips together to keep from saying anything.

"You bear no blame for my injury," Nyssa tells him, though it takes clear effort for her to do so.

Connor's face tightens in a way that's eerily familiar. He doesn't believe her, but he's going to internalize it. Oliver knows, because he knows that look. He's worn it himself entirely too many times.

"We have to get her upstairs, now," Oliver says as he registers the sounds of the police sirens getting nearer still. "If she's here when the police get here…"

Felicity's eyes widen at that. Because he's right. Injured or not. Whatever her reasons for being here, Bryce and Lance will arrest Nyssa on sight for Chen Na Wei's murder as well as laundry list of other charges.

"Sure you are," Connor tells her with clear-eyed innocence that only a child can authentically have. "You're mine."

Nyssa trips a step, whether due to Connor's words or the immense pain she has to be in is unclear, but it helps mask the way Oliver's feet stutter at his son's words. For that, he's very grateful. This boy, his boy, he doesn't know how to even begin to talk to him, who he's supposed to be to him, but Nyssa, of all people, is his hero.

"I make for a poor role model," she tells him. "My sins are many. The goodness you ascribe me is misassigned."
"Whatever else you did, you also saved me," Connor says stubbornly as he stops the elevator door from closing on the adults. "So maybe you're not just a hero and maybe you're not always a hero, but you're that, too."

Oliver's possibly as gobsmacked by that statement as Nyssa is, but Felicity is suddenly completely failing to bite back a smile. It's distracting. More than it should be. But that look of utter pride and delight is just… it hits Oliver hard, sucks the breath out of him. Every time he thinks he couldn't love this woman more, she proves him wrong.

"What floor?" Connor asks, his voice breaking through Oliver's thoughts.

"Here," Felicity offers, swiping her badge to get them up to the penthouse apartments.

The elevator doors slide shut, cutting off the ever-increasing wail of sirens and leaving them all in an odd silence. With the imminent danger behind them, the reality of everything starts to slide through Oliver's mind.

"There's a problem with bringing them up there, you know?" Felicity asks, breaking through his thoughts.

Oliver winces.

"There's more than one problem," he replies. "One is just more immediate than the others… barely."

"Why don't I take Connor to Pamela's office instead?" Felicity offers.

"No," Oliver says immediately.

"Oliver-" Felicity starts to protest.

"I'm not letting either one of you out of my sight, okay?" Oliver says, stress coloring his voice.

Felicity watches him for a moment, lips thinned as they press together, before she nods in agreement.

"Okay, but… you're kinda putting a base and an acid in the same room together and expecting them not to explode, you realize? Remember those volcanos that every science class in the world made in elementary school? This is exactly what you're creating right now," Felicity tells him, tilting her head pointedly toward Nyssa.

"I know not what you are speaking of," Nyssa says in confusion.

"Baking soda and vinegar," Connor offers with an attempt at helpfulness. "It's awesome. I can show you later."

"Can you get a message to your father?" Oliver asks Nyssa, surprising everyone.

"Why?" Nyssa demands.

"Because Malcolm Merlyn is upstairs and it's past time to make a deal," Oliver tells her.

Felicity doesn't disagree. He knows she doesn't. But she's looking at him like she wants to make sure that he's sure. Her hand is on his elbow and her eyes searching, waiting for him to say more.

"He's here?" Nyssa hisses in distaste.

"I want my family safe," Oliver emphasizes. "I want my sister home. I want Tommy back. I want to
not have to worry about Felicity being kidnaped… again. I want to know…”

His eyes drift toward Connor briefly before snapping back to Nyssa. He can only imagine how scared Connor was, with masked assassins kidnapping him from his own bed. No child should have to live with that kind of fear. And Oliver finds that he will give almost anything to make sure that his son doesn’t.

"I want to know that this business with the League is settled," he continues. "If the price for the safety of everyone I care about is Malcolm Merlyn, I can live with that. He made his own bed. He can lie in it."

"It's too late for that," Nyssa tells him with a shake of her head.

"What? Why?" Felicity asks.

"Because Malcolm Merlyn is only the start of the problem," Nyssa informs them as the elevator doors open. "Al Mobaath is to succeed my father as the Demon's Head. And after he makes Malcolm Merlyn pay for his crimes, he will lay waste to this city to ensure his own ascension."

"...What?" Felicity asks a little breathlessly while Oliver blinks towards Nyssa in dim comprehension. "That's… ridiculous."

"It is our way," Nyssa tells them. "My father has declared Al Mobaath his heir. To fully ascend to Ra's, he must destroy his home."

"Tommy wouldn't do that," Oliver insists.

"I cannot stress enough to you that your Tommy is dead," Nyssa tells him coldly, stopping the elevator door from shutting. "The man who wears his face now is Al Mobaath. He is forged of fire and steel, reborn of the waters of the Lazarus Pit and molded in my father's image. And he will destroy this city you have fought so hard to save if you underestimate him."

Connor's brow furrows at that. He's a child with no real understanding of what's going on, but he's being given far too many pieces of the puzzle for Oliver's liking.

"I can get through to him," Oliver insists, ignoring the Connor issue for now because it's easier to do so. "He's… he didn't attack me. Downstairs, you were injured and I was unarmed. He would have had the upper hand. So why didn't he? Tommy's not gone. Not entirely. We can still save him."

"You are wrong," Nyssa tells him decisively, wavering a little and clutching at her arm where the blood has now seeped through Oliver's make-shift bandage. "You are wrong. You will try and you will fail and we will all pay for it."

"We need to get her stitched up," Felicity says gently, pulling them back to the problem at hand. "And hidden… before the police get here. Which could be, like, any second."

She's right, he realizes. They don't have time for this right now. They never seem to have time when they need it.

"Right," Oliver says, moving towards the apartment. "You three to the kitchen. I'll deal with Malcolm."

"You want me to stitch her up?" Felicity asks, blinking and looking a little nauseous at the idea.

"I can mend my own wounds," Nyssa says firmly.
"It's to the bone, Nyssa," Oliver points out. "We're calling Lyla to patch you up. We need someone with actual medical training."

No one gets a chance to respond before Oliver strides into the apartment, all of them close on his heels.

There's too much going on in Oliver's head. There's Connor and all that he entails, there's the League and the safety of the city, there's Felicity and Thea and a hundred other things. But right now, in this moment, chief amongst all of these things is this: Tommy is alive.

Sort of.

He's clearly been brainwashed or conditioned somehow into serving Ra's al Ghul. He sought out Connor to drag Thea and Malcolm out into the open. He knew about Connor… how? The more the question rattles around Oliver's head, the more he thinks he knows the answer. The more everything else starts to make a terrible kind of sense. And the more unhappy about it he is.

From the look on Felicity's face, Oliver suspects she's reached the same conclusions.

"Oliver, what's going-" Thea starts.

But Oliver doesn't even stop to acknowledge his sister. If he was angry at Malcolm before, seeing his smug face while knowing, knowing all that man has done positively enrages him.

His fist connects with Malcolm's jaw with so much force that it sends the other man stumbling backwards. It's possibly the most satisfying punch he's ever thrown in his life. But this has been a long time coming and Oliver is done with Malcolm's lies and manipulations.

"Oliver!" Thea shouts.

"Get in the kitchen, Thea," he orders, dimly aware that Nyssa, Connor and Felicity have paused in the doorway behind him.

"We're allies, Oliver," Malcolm says, holding his jaw with one hand and raising the other in a gesture of peace. "Whatever she's told you is a lie. She is her father's soldier. She will betray you and Thea and Connor. I'm in this to protect my family, you know-"

"Like Tommy?" Oliver spits back at the other man and watches as Malcolm pales a shade, recalculating.

"You knew," Oliver insists, absolutely certain for the first time that he's right, that Malcolm has know about Tommy all along.

"You don't understand," Malcolm implores.

"How long were you going to lie to us? To your daughter?" Oliver asks him. "Haven't you done enough damage? Are you even capable of telling the truth."

"This is far more complicated than you can possibly begin to understand, Oliver," Malcolm tells him.

"I understand that Tommy is alive," Oliver says, keeping his focus on Malcolm but not missing the way Thea's hand flies to her mouth as she sinks into a chair. "I understand that you put Connor in danger for your own selfish reasons. I understand that your endgame isn't just engineering your own safety, but taking over the mantle of Ra's and commanding the League of Assassins. I am done trusting anything you have to say to me."
"Nyssa will betray you. You are making a huge mistake," Malcolm tells him seriously.

"Maybe," Oliver says. "But trusting you would be a bigger one."

"My loyalty to my father has reached its end," Nyssa announces decisively.

"Just like that?" Malcolm asks, sneering at her. "You expect anyone to believe that? No one leaves the League."

"You did," Nyssa counters.

"And I have been hunted for it," Malcolm responds crispily. "You have spent your entire life in the League. And now… what? You leave because kidnapping a child is outside your comfort zone?"

"The notion was distasteful, but it was not my motivation," Nyssa tells him. "I left because Al Mobaath has been declared my father's successor. My rank and life are forfeit within the League."

Malcolm pales at this, a stunned, sicky look taking over his face.

"You didn't know," Oliver realizes immediately. "You knew he was back. You knew Ra's had him, but you didn't know his plans."

"We are all in grave danger," Malcolm tells him in a way that isn't really a response.

"That seems to be the case whenever you're around," Oliver replies.

"Be that as it may, this is Ra's' doing. Not mine," Malcolm insists.

It's debatable. Obviously. So much of this traces back to Malcolm's attack on the Glades, making it even more ridiculous that Tommy - Al Mobaath - is expected to destroy the city to compete his ascension. But that's immaterial right now. They have bigger issues… somehow.

"Bryce and Lance are on their way up with Pamela," Felicity says, looking up from her phone. "So anyone currently wanted for murder needs to hide or we're all going to jail."

"Malcolm, go to the guest room. Thea, keep an eye on him," Oliver commands, to which Thea immediately nods in agreement.

"You honestly think I'm so foolhardy as to reveal myself to the police?" Malcolm asks disdainfully. "I honestly don't know what you'd do. And I'm not making any assumptions," Oliver tells him.

"Neither am I," Thea hisses at her father. "Come on."

Malcolm gives his daughter a warning glare but follows in her wake, closing the guest room door behind him after they enter the room.

"Connor, can you take Nyssa to my bathroom? Make sure she stays awake until Lyla gets here?" Felicity asks the boy. "She's lost a lot of blood and that would be a really big help."

Connor nods firmly, a boy with a mission and someone to save. It might be sort of adorable to Oliver if it wasn't so terrifyingly familiar.

"He was seen," Nyssa points out, shaking her head. "There has been much coverage of his disappearance on the news and many of your employees saw him in the lobby. Your police will know he's here. Keeping him hidden is not in our best interests, lest they see fit to start inspecting
Oliver flinches at that because she's right. There's no way the police will miss that Connor was at the center of the battle in the lobby.

"We can't have attention drawn to him. The media will be all over this story. It's not safe for him," Oliver argues, a token protest for sure, but not untrue.

"There can be no safety for any of us so long as Al Mobaath draws breath, least of all for your son," Nyssa says flatly.

It's like all of the air sucks out of the room all at once. Oliver's eyes shoot immediately to Connor's confused face. He watches as the boy's eyes widen and the words roll over him. Oliver has never in his life been quite so conflicted about what he's supposed to do. He doesn't know what reassurances to offer, what comfort to give. He doesn't know how to be a father. He's lost. Ill-prepared. He's not ready for this. He's not sure he ever could be ready.

"My… my father's dead," Connor says, looking at the adults in the room like he's expecting them all to agree, to backtrack and say they made a mistake. "My mom said so. My dad's dead."

"I'm… there's…" Oliver starts, fumbling with words in a way he's hasn't really done since the first time he asked Felicity on a date. "It's… complicated."

This is, of course, not anywhere near a good enough explanation.

"It's not complicated," Connor argues firmly. "My dad's dead. My mom wouldn't lie to me."

And, oh God, he really wishes he'd had a chance to talk to Sandra about all of this before talking to Connor. He really, really does.

"She thought I was," Oliver says finally, taking a half-step toward Connor before halting to an awkward stop. "Everyone thought I was. For… a really long time. Years. And I didn't… I haven't seen your mom since I got back. I didn't know… I didn't know about you. If I had I would've… it would've been different."

Everything in Connor's entire countenance is closed off. His face is guarded and his arms wrapped around his middle protectively and he's planted as close to Nyssa's side as he can be without jostling her injured arm and it hurts. Unexpectedly. Oliver hadn't really had much time to develop much in the way of expectations for what things would be like between him and his son, but somehow… this wasn't it.

"I don't believe you," Connor says in barely-there voice, face red and eyes watery.

"Okay," Oliver tells him, smiling sadly at the boy who looks so much like him that it hurts. "You don't have to. But… if you have questions. You can ask them. Okay?"

"I don't," Connor says in a fierce little whisper of a voice.

"That's okay, too," Oliver tells him.

Connor pauses a moment, watches Oliver appraisingly, then nods. He did the right thing… he thinks. Judging by the way Felicity is looking at him, she thinks so, too.

The knock on the door startles everyone, though really it shouldn't. They knew Lance and Bryce were on their way up. But still… it does.
"We're out of time," Felicity says quietly.

Nyssa nods and heads toward the master bathroom, shutting the doors behind her as she goes.

"Connor… are you okay?" Felicity asks softly.

"I'm fine," he mumbles, swiping angrily at a tear on his cheek.

He tells the truth to her approximately as convincingly as his father. But there's no time to deal with that at the moment, not with Lance and Bryce at the door. They're out of time. Out of moves. And Oliver swings open the door.
Chapter 6

There should be *at least* one more chapter this week. And it'll be a big one. But for now... enjoy! <3

The looks of surprise on Lance, Bryce and Pamela's faces might have been almost comical if the situation hadn't been so dire. The three of them just stand there blinking at Oliver for a moment, which is... actually highly understandable once Oliver stops to realize he's both *shirtless* and has Nyssa's blood all over his hands.

"Come in," he says gruffly.

"Are you okay?" Pamela asks, looking deeply concerned.

"I'm fine. It's not my blood," he tells her.

Pamela looks no less concerned at this revelation, but then she *is* utterly devoted to maintaining his positive image and that kind of confession has to be distressing.

"I was helping someone injured downstairs," Oliver tells her, leaving Pamela looking far less like she might be about to have a panic attack.

"Connor?" Lance asks surprised, spying the boy with tear-stained cheeks halfway across the room. "Connor Hawke?"

"What the hell is going on, Queen?" Bryce asks uneasily.

"You okay kid?" Lance asks Connor, moving toward the boy.

Connor apparently doesn't much like being the center of attention. He gravitates a few steps towards Felicity, away from Lance, much like he'd done earlier with Nyssa. His body language is all uneasiness and distance. That's fair, when Oliver thinks about it. The boy has been through a hell of a lot in the last day or so. But that also makes it even more of a step in the right direction, in Oliver's mind, when Felicity puts a supportive hand on Connor's shoulder and the boy neither shrugs her off nor flinches.

"I'm fine," Connor says, hesitating before he continues. "Is... Is my mom alright?"

"She's not hurt, but she's worried outta her mind about you, kid," Lance tells him gently.

Oliver lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. In all the frenzy of the morning, he hadn't even taken a moment to *consider* Sandra. Getting used to being Connor's father is going to be an adjustment enough. He definitely doesn't want to suddenly have full custody, too. And besides... it's hard enough to lose your mom as a full-grown man. He'd never wish that on a child, especially not his own son.

"Can we get her up here, Pamela?" Oliver asks and Felicity hands him some wipes from her bag and he starts scrubbing the blood off of his hands. "As soon as possible."
"And quietly?" Pamela asks in a way that really isn't a question. "Oliver, this is a goddamned mess. You've got two dead security guards and a whole mess of terrified employees. The press is crawling outside. I'll arrange for her discretely to be brought in, but we have a hell of a lot of work to do."

"Who?" Oliver demands.

"What?" Pamela questions in confusion.

"The security guards," Oliver elaborates. "Who did we lose?"

"Bruce Prescott and Emilio Perez," Pamela advises.

There are no names that would have been good, but Oliver flinches and his shoulders droop at the words. Bruce… Bruce who's been as reliable a head of security as Oliver could have possibly asked for. And Emilio, an early twenty-something kid who'd always grinned a full-dimpled smile and winked at Felicity just to make her blush.

"It's not your fault," Felicity tells him, placing a hand on his shoulder, much as she'd done to Connor a few moments prior. "You had no way of knowing any of this was going to happen."

"I need to call Bruce's wife and Emilio's mother," Oliver says grimly.

"Police are there now," Lance tells him. "Give us the day. You got bigger things to be dealing with at the moment."

"Bigger things than two of my employees being murdered at my company?" Oliver asks gruffly, obviously annoyed.

"Oliver… you know what they mean," Felicity tells him gently. And he does.

Really, he does. But that doesn't make their glossing over the deaths of two good men any more palatable.

"I'm sorry for your company's loss - that's a mess we'll get to in a moment - but, why is he here?" Bryce demands, nodding his head toward Connor. "He's a kidnapped minor. It's great you want to fly his mother up and all. Very admirable. But if you think we're just going to leave him here with you in the meantime, regardless of our… alliances… you need to take a step back."

"Oliver, I think it's in your best interests to have legal counsel present for any statement you're going to give," Pamela tells him with a fixed look.

He understands where she's coming from, but the very last thing he wants is any more people being pulled into the ever-expanding circle of those who know his secrets. Then again… there's at least one lawyer he knows who really should be here for this.

"Can you get in touch with Laurel?" He asks Felicity. "She should be here."

Felicity nods, pulls out her cell phone and steps to the side.

"Not exactly what I meant," Pamela clarifies.

"What's Laurel got to do with any of this?" Lance asks.
"It involves her… or it will, anyhow," Oliver says with a sigh. "And she's… none of this is going to be easy for her."

"Okay, back this up," Bryce insists, cutting off whatever Lance had been about to say. "You had two masked ninjas fighting each other in the lobby. They killed two of your employees and you've got a kidnapped ten-year-old in your apartment. Explain."

"The League is after Malcolm," Oliver tells them, taking a shirt from Felicity's hands and pulling his over his head as she rejoins them. "They tried going after Thea to get to him."

"Why in the hell would they do that?" Lance asks, pulling a face.

Oliver hesitates before responding. He'd honestly forgotten that Lance and Bryce hadn't known. And, as much as it's not his secret to give away, there's no way around telling them right now. It's too integral to what's going on.

He sighs and hopes Thea will understand.

"She's his daughter," Oliver admits as Felicity's fingers tangle with his and give a little squeeze of support.

"You gotta be kiddin' me," Lance says, blinking at him.

"My mother admitted in court to having an affair with Malcolm," Oliver reminds him. "Malcolm didn't know she was his until that happened. The district attorney had uncovered enough about the link between them to make Malcolm suspicious and he confronted my mom."

"That still doesn't explain why Connor is here," Bryce points out.

"The League couldn't get to Thea, so they decided to try another tactic to draw her out into the open," Oliver tells him levelly.

Oliver looks to the side toward Connor. The boy obviously dislikes being the focus of all of this. He's standing firmly with his jaw set and his arms folded in front of his chest. He's in exactly the same stance Oliver is, actually. And it's… it's striking. There's never been any doubt in Oliver's mind that Connor is his son, but if there had been, it would dissolve now. Honestly, Oliver's a little amazed that Lance hasn't put the pieces together by now.

"They're kidnappin' kids and droppin' 'em on your doorstep to draw Thea Queen out? How's that work?" Lance asks in disbelief.

Bryce, however, is considerably more observant. His eyes flicker back and forth between Connor and Oliver, understanding shading them as he takes in the two men who really do look so unmistakably alike once it's alluded to.

"He's your son," Bryce realizes aloud.

"No, that's…" Lance starts with a laugh before realization rolls across his face and the laugh falls to an abrupt halt. "That's not… That can't…"

"My dad's dead," Connor insists, barely above a whisper, hanging on to that notion with every fiber of his being. "My mom said so."

"Connor…" Oliver starts, unsure how to finish.
"He is!" Connor shouts, tearing up and red-faced with some mixture of anger and self-preservation. "He is because if he wasn't he'd of been there. He'd have taught me to play baseball and read me comic books and I'd have been able to go on that stupid father-son camping trip for scouts because I'd have had a dad but I didn't because he's dead."

"Connor… Connor, I swear to God, if I'd-" Oliver starts, almost choking on the words and fighting tearing up himself.

"No," Connor says insistently, stomping off in the direction Nyssa had gone earlier and slamming the door behind him as he goes.

"God damn it," Oliver growls, scrubbing his hands through his hair in tremendous frustration.

"It's gonna take time, Oliver," Felicity tells him softly, low enough that maybe Lance and Bryce and Pamela can't hear her.

He nods firmly, but doesn't trust his voice to say anything. Not now. Not when he's just heard Connor list off all the ways he's failed him.

"It'll be okay, alright?" Felicity asks him, placing her hands on his shoulders and trying to catch his eye. "I promise."

"Yeah," Oliver ventures, his voice tight and not entirely convincing.

"I'm gonna go see if he wants to talk. Okay?" Felicity asks.

Oliver just nods, not trusting his voice. Felicity lets one hand squeeze at the back of his neck before she lets go, her blunt little nails trailing on his skin and siphoning off the smallest amount of tension as she goes.

"Sit down, Queen," Bryce says with uncharacteristic softness.

"I'm fine," Oliver insists, scrubbing his hands over his face and blinking hard.

"I'd be surprised and worried if that were true," Bryce tells him sagely.

"I'll be fine," Oliver amends.

"Well, see, now that's more believable," Bryce responds.

Oliver doesn't miss Lance's uncharacteristic silence, nor does he miss the look of disappointment and anger that shades his face. That's fair, really. Oliver wronged Laurel a lot of ways during the course of their relationship. This is, arguably, right up there with the worst of them.

"I'm going to go feed the press so they don't fucking bite us. And I'll arrange for the QC jet to pick up Sandra," Pamela announces.

"Thank you, Pamela. Let me know what you want me to say," Oliver tells her.

"Not a goddamned thing at the moment," Pamela advises. "We'll do a statement in a bit that I'll want to clear with you. But until then, don't say a thing to the press. Hell, don't even leave the building. Got it?"

Oliver just nods. Pamela must be appeased by that, though, because she's out the door a moment later, leaving just Oliver, Bryce and Lance in the room.
"When'd you find out?" Lance asks, sounding exactly as pissed off as Oliver thought he was.

"Yesterday," Oliver says with a sharp, humorless laugh. "Pamela's known forever, apparently. She thought I did, too. I didn't."

"An' he's how old exactly?" Lance questions, the accusation clear in his voice.

"Ten," Oliver says, looking Lance dead in the eye. "I was a terrible boyfriend to Laurel. I know that. I was a terrible person then, really. But I didn't... Even at my worst, I'd have taken responsibility for him if I'd known about him. I don't know that I would have been a good father. I probably wouldn't have. But I'd have tried."

"You were a real son of a bitch, Queen," Lance says, clearly still offended on his daughter's behalf.

"If you could just... " Oliver starts, looking back towards the door Connor escaped through earlier. "Look, I get why you're pissed at me. I'm pissed at me, too. But when Connor's around, could you please just... try to not let him in on how miserable a person I was back then? It's going to be hard enough to figure things out with him and I just... I don't want him to see me how I was. I don't want anyone to see me how I was."

"Sounds fair," Bryce says, shooting Lance a look.

Lance tilts his head in agreement, lips pressed firmly together. He's not thrilled, but he'll leave it alone. For now.

"So the League came after your son to get your sister to reveal herself so they can get to her father?" Bryce asks.

"As ridiculous as that sounds... yes," Oliver agrees. "The League is obsessed with blood. If they can't get to someone, they go through their family. Apparently that can be a bit of a chain reaction."

"How'd he get here?" Lance asks.

"It's complicated," Oliver offers up.

"Simplify it," Bryce demands.

"There's... a power struggle inside the League," Oliver settles on after a moment. "Ra's is trying to declare a new heir, pushing Nyssa out. She knew Ra's was sending his chosen heir after Connor. She got there first, brought him here to protect him."

"So it was Nyssa and this heir battling in the lobby?" Lance asks.

"Yeah," Oliver agrees, staring off to the side as the memory of Tommy's face being revealed from behind that mask floats to the forefront of his mind.

"Whose blood was it on your hands?" Bryce asks.

"Nyssa's," Oliver admits. "Al Mobaath... Ra's heir... he sliced her arm pretty badly. She should be okay, but it bled pretty badly."

"Nyssa's wanted for murder, you realize?" Bryce asks with a raised eyebrow.

"If you think I'm giving up a woman who saved not only my son's life but also Felicity's and Roy's and both Sara and Laurel's, you're sorely mistaken," Oliver tells him bluntly.
"And if you think I'm not searching your apartment to find her, you're sorely mistaken," Bryce says levelly.

"Get a damned warrant, then," Oliver says firmly. "Because you're not going through my home without one."

"Oliver," Bryce says warningly.

"No," Oliver insists. "Pick your battles, Major. Is this really something you want to go to bat for?"

"She murdered Chien Na Wei right in front of me," Bryce points out.

"She did," Oliver agrees. "And while she really shouldn't have, is that really something so terribly unforgivable?"

"That's for a jury to decide. Not me," Bryce says.

"Nyssa al Ghul is currently our very best chance of preventing mass destruction of our city, so forgive me if I'm not all that willing to leave her fate up to a jury that couldn't possibly understand the nuances of what's going on," Oliver says.

"What does that mean?" Lance questions.

"It means that taking over as Ra's involves more than just being declared a successor," Oliver informs him. "Al Mobaath's first order of business is to destroy Malcolm Merlyn in any way possible. But after that… after that to ascend to Ra's, he needs to destroy his home city. He needs to level Starling."

"This Al Mobaath… he's from here?" Lance asks. "How'd'ya know that?"

"Because I know him," Oliver admits, sighing. "And so do you."

"Come again?" Lance blinks.

"It's Tommy," Oliver breathes out. "Al Mobaath… he's Tommy."

"...I'm sorry… what?" Lance asks.

"He's been… I don't know. Brainwashed? Something. It's Tommy, but he's not Tommy," Oliver says, hating the words even as he's saying them. "I don't know what Ra's did to him. But it's like… it's like he's been conditioned, somehow."

"And resurrected," Lance adds. "On account of, if we're talkin' about Tommy Merlyn, he's awfully dead last I checked."

"Al Mobaath translates to The Resurrected," Oliver tells him. "I don't blame you for being skeptical. I would be if I hadn't taken his mask off myself."

"That's crazy," Lance announces. "It's absolutely nuts. Tommy Merlyn is dead. I saw his body myself."

"And I was there when he died," Oliver counters. "I was there when he had a piece of steel through his chest and the lights faded from his eyes, but I was here today too and I'm telling you, it was Tommy."

"Jesus, Queen, that's… what the hell am I gonna tell Laurel?" Lance asks bewilderedly. "Him dyin'
threw her off the deep end straight into the bottle. She's a strong kid. She's had to be after everything. But I dunno if she's strong enough to handle him comin' back to life brainwashed and genocidal. I ain't sure anybody is."

Oliver doesn't have a response. Mostly because he doesn't disagree. He's not sure how he's going to handle it either.

"So what's our plan?" Bryce asks. "We need to stop Al Mobaath, protect the city, keep Connor and Thea safe, try to undo whatever the hell this Ra's character did to Tommy Merlyn, hold the League accountable for it's crimes, hold Malcolm responsible for his crimes..."

"That's one hell of a to-do list," Lance shakes his head.

"I don't know," Oliver confesses. "Honestly, I don't. We need to regroup. Come up with a way to deal with this that doesn't end in the city being levelled or someone else dying."

"Where are your sidekicks?" Bryce asks, looking around as if Digg and Roy might pop out of the woodwork.

"My team spread out to try and find Connor. I assume Felicity's gotten messages out to them. Roy and Digg should be on their way back from Coast City by now. Sara will be on a flight back from Metropolis shortly, I'm sure," Oliver tells him.

"Until then?" Bryce asks.

"Until then… Connor stays here. Sandra, too, once she gets here. She's in danger as long as the League is after Connor," Oliver decides aloud.

"Plenty of your enemies know you're the Arrow, Oliver," Lance points out with a heavy look. "Word gets out you got a kid… I ain't so sure the danger's gone when the League is."

Oliver knows this. He does. But he's also not going to let it stand in the way of being a part of his son's life. And he's not going to hide it. His son deserves better than an absentee father who doesn't publicly acknowledge him.

"If anyone, anyone threatens my son, the Arrow is very suddenly going to look a whole lot more like the Arrow before the Undertaking," Oliver growls decisively. "No one touches him. No one."

"Oliver… I get it. I do," Lance says. "You know I do. But I dunno if that's gonna be enough."

"Leave that to me," Oliver says.

"And the rest of it?" Bryce probes. "Tommy Merlyn? The League? Malcolm?"

"I have… resources I can call on for help," Oliver says warily. "So long as you don't ask too many questions about them."

"We're already looking the other way on Nyssa," Bryce points out. "How many more allies of yours are we going to have to pretend to not notice?"

"That depends in part on how long all of this takes," Oliver responds sharply.

"Oliver…" Bryce says uneasily.

"The police can't stop this, Major. You know that," Oliver tells him gravely. "This is a centuries old organization that literally goes by the name The League of Assassins. They've razed cities to the
ground. They've murdered countless people. And they aren't even based in this country. You aren't
going to beat them with the SCPD's limited funds and a stack of subpoenas. Even if you could find
them - which you can't - you won't beat them. Because this is what they do. So let me use the
resources at my disposal to stop them. Please."

Bryce and Lance look to each other, communicating in silence.

"I get the feeling I'm going to regret this," Bryce says finally after a moment.

"I already do," adds Lance.

Oliver breathes a sigh of relief though. Even if this was the easiest hurdle to pass for the day, it
is passed. One problem down, countless more to go. Still… at least it's progress. That's something.

It's another fifteen minutes before Lance and Bryce leave. Their questions are exhausting, draining,
but, between the three of them, they manage to simplify things enough for a police report. Oliver
can't begin to imagine how he'd be dealing with this particular crisis without someone on the SCPD
on their side. That, at least, is easier these days.

Lyla gets there shortly after Lance and Bryce leave and Oliver ushers her back towards his bathroom
where Nyssa is still in need of some serious medical attention. Lyla doesn't pause as she breezes
through his room to the bathroom, but Oliver halts in his tracks in the threshold of his bedroom.

In the middle of his bed, Connor is curled up asleep, Felicity perched next to him, carding her fingers
through the boy's hair.

"He's exhausted," she says in a barely elevated whisper, trying not to wake the sleeping child.

"He's had a long day. I'm sure," Oliver murmurs, drinking in the sight.

Felicity eases off the bed, grabs a throw-blanket off a nearby chair and pulls it over Connor before
stepping toward Oliver.

"Thank you," he tells her.

"For what?" she asks, genuinely confused.

There's no good answer to that, too many answers to that. For supporting him. For dealing with the
craziness of their lives so very well. For accepting Connor so readily. For defending and looking out
for him.

"For being you," Oliver finally settles on, because - really - that's the crux of it anyhow.

"Well… that is a specialty of mine," she smiles, amused.

"And I'm grateful for that," he smiles at her affectionately.

She stretches up on her tiptoes and kisses him, a soft, gentle thing that breathes affection and
solidarity into his bones. For a fleeting moment, he finds himself wondering how in the world he'd
have dealt with all of this if it had happened before they'd become... well... *them*. He finds he'd rather not imagine it.

"We should check on Nyssa and Lyla," Oliver says on a sigh, running his hands down Felicity's arms.

"They'll shout if they need us," Felicity tells him, clasping his hand in hers. "Come on."

He follows her back into their empty living room, eyes darting to the guest room door, still closed with Malcolm and Thea behind it.

"Sit down," Felicity tells him, nodding toward the sofa.

"Felicity, we have too much we need to-" he starts.

"Sit," she repeats, more an order than a request. "Just for a moment, Oliver. You need to take a moment for you when you can or you're going to get overwhelmed and exhausted and then you'll punch a hole in the wall and frankly we don't have time for remodeling at the moment."

He huffs out a noise that's almost a laugh as he sits on their sofa. She immediately perches herself on his lap, her back to the armrest, her fingers scraching at the nape of his neck and her long, long legs draped across him. He presses his forehead to hers, lets the comfort of her seep into his skin, and just lets her presence surround him for the moment.

"Connor's going to be fine," she tells him after a moment. "You know that right? You two will be *fine* together. Not like, immediately, but that's okay. You'll get there."

He nods, not fully feeling it.

"How are *you* doing?" she asks.

"I'm okay," he tells her sort of tonelessly.

She raises a disbelieving eyebrow at him.

"I *am*," he says a little more firmly. "I'm... scared as hell, but I'm fine."

"That makes sense," she tells him, smoothing her fingers over his neck. "You have so much more to lose now. Connor... Tommy... It makes sense to be scared."

"I can't..." he starts before rethinking his words. "I've lost a lot of people. I know the finality of that. I never *imagined* I'd see Tommy again. I'd have given anything to have him back. I'd have traded places with him in a heartbeat. But... seeing him like that... like a shell of himself. Felicity, I don't know how to make sense of that."


"I'm not trusting a word out of Malcolm Merlyn's mouth ever again," Oliver says decisively.

"Me either," Felicity tells him again. "I meant Nyssa and Sara."

"We need to find out what Ra's did. We need to find out how to undo it," Oliver tells her.

"And we need to capture Tommy without hurting him *and* while keeping him out of the public eye," she adds.
"At least we know what he's after," Oliver muses. "That helps some."

"You think we can draw him out?" Felicity asks curiously.

"Maybe," Oliver acknowledges. "I won't put Thea or Connor in harm's way, but that doesn't mean we can't use the idea of them to lure him out into the open."

"Okay," she agrees, the beginnings of a plan rumbling around her head. "That might work."

Oliver opens his mouth to say something, but the words don't quite make it out because a knock on the door interrupts them. He sighs. He doesn't want to get up. He's wrapped up in Felicity and his son's asleep in the next room and Thea's safe under his roof and if Tommy were here and sane then everything would just be damned near ideal. But he's not. And Queen Consolidated is a crime scene. And Ra's al Ghul plans to level the city.

Felicity slides off his lap and moves to answer the door. Instinctively, Oliver stands, tense and ready to fight. She was right. He is too on edge.

It's not the League at the door though - as if they would knock. Nor is it Sandra or even Laurel, both of whom he's not particularly relishing seeing. No. It's Pamela.

"We have a problem," she says, breezing in.

Alright, he's not particularly thrilled to see her either, really.

"That's the theme of the day, apparently," Felicity says wryly.

"What's wrong?" Oliver asks.

"A kid with a camera phone was outside the window and video taped the whole fight. The press is running with it," Pamela tells them.

Oliver groans in frustration. The press. The goddamned press. Of course they're all over this.

"Did they get a clear shot of the other man's face?" Oliver asks.

"Why is that…" Pamela starts before cutting herself off in bewilderment. "Oliver… they have your face all over television in a sword fight with a ninja in the lobby and you're worried about publicly unmasking the guy? … How are these words coming out of my mouth right now?"

"Pamela… this is important," Oliver says more intensely. "The other man. Did they get a shot of his face."

"It's a cell phone video, Oliver," Pamela tells him. "It's grainy and jerky. You can't make out who it is. Why the hell is that your main concern?"

"You don't want to know," Oliver tells her.

And he's right. He knows that. The second Pamela thinks about it, she knows it, too.

"We need to make a statement," Pamela tells him after a moment. "The good news here is that you're coming off like a hero. Stock prices are going to soar."

"Well... if it helps stock prices," Oliver intones bitterly.

"Don't pull this with me," Pamela shakes her head. "Try to be a little glass-half-full, would you?"
"Half is overly optimistic," Felicity points out. "And I say this as an optimist."

"Does the video show Connor?" Oliver asks, frame suddenly stiffening.

"It does," Pamela tells him hesitantly, which leads to a very long string of very impressive Russian that's mostly likely entirely cursing.

"I want him kept out of this," Oliver tells her firmly.

"Yeah. I get that," Pamela acknowledges. "Might not be an option at this point, though."

"Pamela..." Oliver says warningly.

"The press is already asking questions," she tells him. "Why is he here? How is he here? What is he to you? Why was your girlfriend putting herself between him and danger? Why was a ninja after him? It's a sexy story, Oliver. There are ninjas. They aren't gonna drop it."

"I need to talk to Sandra before they figure out that I'm Connor's father," Oliver insists. "And she and I need to talk to Connor together because he doesn't deserve for the press to suddenly be swarming all over him at all, but much less before he understands what's going on."

"I don't know how long I can hold them off," Pamela admits. "I mean, the ninja thing is a really great distraction, especially that blindingly hot one who got hurt and was obviously protecting the kid, but Connor looks very much like you, Oliver. Sooner or later, the media will piece it together."

"Make it later," Oliver insists.

"How'd you meet his mother?" Pamela asks with characteristic bluntness.

"Why does that matter?" Oliver asks.

"Because the more obvious the connection between the two of you is, the sooner the press is going to put it together," Pamela informs him.

Oliver grimaces at that. She's right. And he's really like it if the connection was murky and untraceable but it's not.

"She was a lifeguard for the summer at my parents' country club," he admits.

And Pamela - being Pamela - is literally taking notes on a spiral bound notebook as he talks.

"Was it a one-time hanky-panky in the pool house then, or...?" she asks, voice trailing off.

"No," Oliver says uneasily. "No, she... it went on longer than that. Maybe... two months? Something like that. I'm not really sure. It was a long time ago."

"Any public dates? Or all behind closed doors?" Pamela asks.

"I was dating Laurel at the time, so... no. I'm fairly sure the only times we might have been seen together were at the country club," Oliver says, eyes darting toward Felicity as he speaks.

He finds no judgement there. Truthfully, he'd known he wouldn't, but it's still a relief. He's not proud of who he was then. But, then, Felicity already knows that.

"I'll do my best, Oliver, but the country club connection and the timing is more than enough for people to start piecing things together. You know this, right?" she asks weightily.
"Just bury it as best you can," Oliver tells her.

"And possibly find a world-class fencing coach to pay off and say he trained you?" Pamela asks with raised eyebrows.

"That… might not be the worst idea ever," Oliver acknowledges.

"I'm not saying you're the Arrow, Oliver, but if you don't want people to think you then probably don't get into crazy public battles with absurd skillsets you can't easily explain, okay?" Pamela asks.

"Pamela…" he says with a laugh, because there's literally no way in the world that Pamela doesn't know by now. It's not possible.

"I'm gonna leave it at that," Pamela says, holding a hand up to indicate for him to stop talking.

"Okay," Oliver agrees, looking thoroughly amused.

"Anything else?" Pamela asks.

"Yeah. Announce that QC is closed through the end of the week. Employees will be paid, but we're giving the police space to do their investigation and offering free counseling services to all employees who want it," Oliver tells her.

"You're trying to control who gets in the building," Felicity notes.

"Absolutely," Oliver agrees.

"I don't give a damn why you're doing it," Pamela says blankly. "I could kiss you for it. Excellent public perception there. Very caring upper management image. I love it."

"Well.. if it makes you happy," Oliver replies with amusement.

"Charmer," she accuses back like it's a bad thing.

"We have an ETA on Sandra?" Oliver asks.

"We had a jet in Central City. It should be leaving any moment," Pamela tells him. "I'd say… two hours? Three at most."

"Did you talk to her?" Oliver asks.

"Yes," Pamela confirms.

"How'd she seem?" Oliver questions with some hesitation.

"Relieved, mostly," Pamela advises. "Definitely wary when she realized Connor was here with you, but overwhelmingly just relieved that he's okay."

"Good," Oliver says, realizing that's probably the best response he could have hoped for.

"Well… I have things to do," Pamela announces, closing her notebook. "And while I don't know, I suspect you do, too. Possibly things involving actual ninjas."

"Very possibly," Oliver agrees.

"Not another word," Pamela tells him.
He smiles charminly in response, but doesn't say anything. And when she leaves just moments later and Felicity wraps her arms around his middle, things might not be any more resolved, but at least he feels a little more grounded than he had before.
"You can't do this!"

"I'm pretty sure you'll find I can."

"Ollie… I mean, I hate him as much as anyone, but how long do you think you can keep Malcolm handcuffed to the toilet?" Thea asks uneasily from the doorway.

Oliver steps back and studies Malcolm like he's really thinking about the question seriously. He's not. He knows the answer already.

"That depends…" he says finally.

"On what?" Malcolm demands commandingly, which looks fairly absurd considering the main is literally chained to a toilet.

"On how long it takes to save Tommy and overthrow Ra's," Oliver tells him.

"You can't just leave me here, Oliver. You can't," Malcolm says more insistently.

Oliver leans forward so he's invading Malcolm's personal space before he speaks again. Truth be told, it feels good to have the decidedly upper-hand with Malcolm for once.

"I can't let Tommy kill you. I can't trust you. I can't let you escape. I can't let you out of my damned sight, but I can keep you here," Oliver tells him.

"You don't understand," Malcolm insists a little more desperately. "There's more to this than you know. I have allies, Oliver. They'll come looking for me. You can't keep me here or there will be consequences you can't even begin to dream of."

"Even if I believed you, the threat right now is my best friend torturing and killing my son and my sister before destroying the entire city and everyone in it," Oliver reminds him. "There's nothing worse than that. There's no threat you or your allies can make that tops that."

"Oliver… OLIVER," Malcolm shouts as Oliver turns to leave, but Oliver is done listening.

He stops in the doorway where Thea is standing there with her arms crossed looking up at him.

"If he keeps shouting, gag him," Oliver tells her.

Thea's eyebrows go up and she purses her lips for a moment before nodding.

"Well… okay then," she agrees with a toothy grin. "I was going to go check on Nyssa, but your idea sounds like more fun."

"You can do both," Oliver shrugs.

"Thea…" Malcolm says with a warning tone, apparently changing who to appeal to.

Oliver doesn't think Malcolm will have any more luck with Thea than he did with him. She's livid.
with her father, both over him exposing Connor to the League and keeping Tommy's survival a secret from her. Frankly, Oliver isn't sure his sister won't gag her father just because she can. If he'd been living for the better part of a year with Malcolm hiding on a boat, he's pretty sure he'd want to gag him, too.

"Damn it," Felicity's frustrated voice rings out from the kitchen a second before the smoke alarm starts going off.

It's somewhat satisfying to hear Malcolm's indignant shouts suddenly muffled, but Oliver doesn't dwell on that. Instead he heads toward the kitchen where there's a thin haze of smoke drifting out at the top of the doorway.

"Felicity?" he asks with some concern.

"I've got it," she shouts back.

He rounds the corner to find her standing on a chair waving a dishtowel furiously at the smoke detector. It doesn't take long for him to figure out exactly what's going on. This used to happen with some frequency, actually, back when they first moved in together and she'd decided that she should cook some of the time. Just... he sort of thought she'd learned that wasn't the best idea months ago.

"You were... cooking?" he asks hesitantly as the smoke alarm quiets down and she steps off of the chair.

"Connor woke up," she says as explanation.

"...Okay?" he says, looking past her to see a burnt mess of something in a pot.

"He's hungry, Oliver," she says sharply. "He's hungry and we have like... that spicy pork dish you made the night before last and leftover lamb and he's ten. He's not going to eat those things."

"So... you were cooking him... what exactly?" Oliver asks, looking at the pot again.

"Macaroni and cheese," she says uneasily.

"Okay," he agrees, because there's literally nothing else he can say without getting himself in trouble.

"I don't know how to do this!" she exclaims in frustration, throwing the dishtowel, her blue eyes suddenly watery.

And... alright, maybe there was nothing he could say without getting himself in trouble. He's not exactly sure what's going on with her right now, but he does know how to deal with it.

"Do what?" he asks, moving towards her and drawing her into his arms as as she starts honestly sniffing. "Hey... hey, you're amazing. You can do anything... well, except cook. Maybe leave that to me... and the Chinese place down the street."

She sort of half laughs and half sobs at that before burying her face in Oliver's chest and holding on to him like she's clinging on to home.

"I want him to like me," she mumbles into Oliver's chest finally. "I really want him to like me."

"He does like you," Oliver tells her immediately. "I'm pretty sure he likes you more than he likes me right now."

She stares up at him with an unimpressed look on her face. They're both well aware that Connor isn't
exactly Oliver's biggest fan at the moment. It's sort of undeniable.

"He likes Nyssa better than either of us," she points out.

"Right, well… she is a ninja who saved him from being kidnapped and defended him with a sword. That probably that earned her some points," Oliver reminds her.

"I just… there's so much right now," she says, her lower lip shaking some and her eyes still watering up. "I have Malcolm Merlyn chained to my toilet. You have a son and he's here. Tommy's alive but, like, *Imperiused*. The former heir to the demon is doped up on pain medicine and asleep in our guest room. Your son's mother is on her way and I just… I just wanted to make him macaroni and cheese, okay?"

"Okay," he agrees easily.

He gets it. He does. There's so much out of their control right now and she's been his *rock* through this whole thing, but even she has her breaking point. She can't do anything about Malcolm or Tommy or Nyssa or Sandra, but Connor… Connor at least she can help.

"How about we make it together?" he offers her.

"You mean you want me to stand here and watch while you make macaroni and cheese, don't you?" she asks, eyes narrowing slightly in accusation.

"Well… I mean, you'd be there for moral support," he tells her.

She huffs a laugh and shakes her head.

"It's a really important part of cooking," he assures her.

"Sure it is," she scoffs.

"It is!" he insists. "You make everything better just by being there."

It's cheesy as hell, but it gets her smiling so it's a victory in his head. He doesn't care if he sounds like a love-sick sap with her. Because he is. It's genuine. He'll be a sappy fool to make her smile any day.

"Fine," she agrees, rolling her eyes, rising to her toes to kiss him lightly and resting her hands on his chest.

"So… is there really a fire?" Connor asks suddenly from the doorway, drawing both of their attention.

"No just… a cooking accident. It's taken care of now," Oliver tells him.

"I shouldn't be allowed near burners, is what Oliver's trying to say," Felicity admits.

"Oh…" Connor says uneasily, shuffling his feet.

"It's okay," Felicity says hurriedly. "Oliver's a good cook. He can whip up some macaroni and cheese for you in no time, okay?"

"I'm allergic to milk," Connor replies.

Felicity's shoulders droop immediately.
"Right," she sighs, glancing back at her epicly failed cooking venture. "Of course you are."

"You couldn't have known that," Oliver reminds her, his hand resting reassuringly against her shoulder.

"I could have asked!" she points out.

"It's okay," Connor tells her with a one-shouldered shrug. "I should've told you. I know it's my job to bring it up. My mom taught me by kindergarten. I always tell people if I'm eating at their house but I just… there's a lot going on. I forgot."

"I'm allergic to peanuts," Felicity offers up.

"So… no macaroni and cheese and no peanut butter and jelly. Okay…" Connor says. "Is there… uh… anything? Cause Nyssa and I didn't exactly stop for breakfast and I'm kinda really hungry."

"How about a ham sandwich?" Oliver offers.

"Yeah, okay," Connor agrees.

"Oh my God, I can make that," Felicity says, looking more delighted than is really warranted.

"No burners involved," Oliver smiles at her.

"Give me five minutes," Felicity says. "Go wash your hands."

Connor gives her a strange look but wanders off to do as she says.

"So can I be your cooking moral support then?" Oliver asks her as she scurries to the fridge and starts pulling things out.

"No…" she tells him, digging through the meat drawer. "You can go wash your hands."

He blinks at her in surprise.

"You're going to have lunch with your son, Oliver," she informs him. "Bond."

"Okay…" Oliver says slowly. "Then we both are."

"What? No. You two need to have a moment or three hundred of father-son time. I'll just… go check on Nyssa or make sure Malcolm hasn't chewed through his handcuffs or something," Felicity says.

"We're a team, Felicity," Oliver points out. "He's my son, but you're my partner. I want him to understand that."

She pauses to look at him, mustard in one hand and a head of lettuce in the other.

"There is… literally no other part of my life that can offer him stability," Oliver points out. "He's in danger because of me. He might always be, honestly. I am pissed as hell at Sandra and I have no idea how we'll deal with this. The media is going to be all over him and they're not going to let up. But you and me? We're solid. I want him to see that. He needs to see that."

"Okay," she says, biting back a smile and pulling out six slices of bread. "Okay… then… let's have lunch."

Perhaps predictably, lunch proves an incredibly awkward affair. Felicity apparently feels like she
needs to set a good example for Connor or something because there's a pile of baby carrots on everyone's plates where she'd definitely normally have potato chips and they all get fruit cups. It's not fresh fruit either. Oliver wouldn't mind it if it were fresh fruit. It's not. It's the canned stuff Felicity likes to mix with her cottage cheese for breakfast. He can't stand this stuff. But, Felicity shoots him a look when he makes a face at it and he realizes very quickly that it's in his own best interests to just eat the syrupy peach, pear and cherry mixture masquerading as fruit.

"Thank you," Connor says when they first sit down.

"You're welcome," Felicity beams proudly back at him.

There's a whole lot of quiet chewing after that. Connor keeps surreptitiously stealing glances in Oliver's direction and Oliver can't think of a single thing to say, but Felicity keeps nudging his knee with hers and raising her eyebrows as she tilts her head toward Connor. He manages a stilted, half-formed question about school, which Connor just shrugs at, and another about sports, which gets a one-line response.

It's terrible, basically.

Oliver's never sat through quite so awkward a meal in his life and that's saying something considering the double date he once had with Helena, Laurel and Tommy.

"So…" Connor starts off uneasily, pushing crumbs around his plate like they might form the words he wants to say. "I'm not saying you're my dad, cause you're not. But… if you were… would that make Felicity my step-mom… or something?"

He hears Felicity's breath catch and he can feel her looking at him. This really, really is a question he should have realized Connor would ask. And, really, if he'd been less distracted by the mass murderer in his bathroom and his recently-resurrected, newly-evil best friend, probably he would have.

"Or something," Oliver agrees. "Felicity and I aren't married, but she is an incredibly important part of my life. She's my partner. We live together."

"Good. 'Cause I have a mom. She's awesome. I don't need another one," Connor says firmly. "I don't need a dad either. I know earlier maybe it sounded like I did, but I don't. I'm fine the way I am. My mom and me, we're fine."

That… hurts. It hurts more than it probably should, but his son is saying he doesn't need him and he's dismissing Felicity and it opens up something raw in Oliver's gut that he hadn't realized could ache so badly.

"I think… I think family isn't about needing someone," Felicity says slowly. "It's about relying on each other and making each other's lives better. I'm not trying to replace your mom, Connor. I wouldn't want to and I wouldn't know how to. But, title or not, I'd like to choose for you to be a part of my family, if you'll let me."

It's a toss-up who is more surprised at Felicity's words, Oliver or Connor. The boy has the grace to at least look a little bit uncomfortable about his earlier statements, but Oliver just finds himself staring at Felicity. How she managed to find exactly the right thing to say to Connor when Oliver has barely been able to string together a full sentence to talk to his son, he has no idea. But he's utterly enchanted by her.

His hand seeks out hers under the table and he squeezes it a little, earning himself a brief, nervous
glance from her. He wants to tell her that she's amazing, that she's handing all of this so much better than she thinks she is, that he'd very much like to give her that stepmother title officially, even if she doesn't feel equipped for it. But this isn't the time for any of that. Not with Connor across the table.

"Okay," Connor says finally. "Just… maybe no more carrots, okay? Vegetables with lunch is totally a mom thing to do."

"I hate them too," Felicity confesses with a scrunched nose.

"It's your house. Why do you even have them if you hate them?" Connor asks bewildered.

"Oliver uses them in smoothies," she confides in a conspiratorial tone.

"Oh that's gross, Oliver," Connor says, pulling a face.

"It doesn't taste like carrots! There are other things in it!" Oliver insists in a tone that is slightly exasperated because he and Felicity have had this conversation a dozen times before and she still won't even try the smoothie.

"Super gross," Felicity agrees with Connor, nodding along with him. "There's kale in it. It's green."

"That's just disgusting," Connor shudders, his little nose scrunched up in distaste.

"I'm feeling a little ganged up on here, guys," Oliver says, even though he not-so-secretly loves it.

"We're ganging up on your taste buds, mister. They need to be overthrown," Felicity tells him.

"Which one of us does the cooking again?" Oliver asks her.

"So not the point," Felicity snorts.

"I'm… pretty sure it is, actually," Oliver tells her.

"Not when I'm the one doing the shopping, it's not. Or, well… the ordering of the groceries online, anyhow," she reminds him. "Maybe after lunch Connor can help me and we can have a shopping order that includes neither kale nor carrots."

"Can there be potato chips?" Connor asks with great gravity.

"On my shopping list? Totally," Felicity tells him. "Come on. Help me clear the plates and then we'll-"

There's a solid knock on the door that cuts Felicity off. She and Oliver trade a quick look. There's been absolutely nothing good that has come from someone showing up at their door for days now and neither one is exactly at ease at the moment.

"In the kitchen," Oliver orders the pair, his tone inviting no argument.

That's okay. Neither one looks like they want to contest that idea anyhow. Connor's learned very quickly to be wary, which is something Oliver is both grateful and sorry for in equal measure.

It's not bad news at the door this time, though. Not exactly, anyhow. As soon as Felicity and Connor are out of sight in the kitchen, Oliver opens the door to find a very anxious looking Sandra Hawke standing on the other side.

He hasn't seen her in over ten years, has only rarely thought of her in that time, but he finds she looks
very much the same as he remembers. And, now that he's face-to-face with her, he can see bits of her in Connor, too. The boy's nose has the same sharp line as her's, his lips are fuller, like hers. The resemblance only serves to drive home that Connor is their son. That she intentionally hid the boy's existence from him. That she lied and said he'd died. And, quite suddenly, Oliver is incredibly, hugely livid with his one-time lover.

"Where is he?" Sandra says, sounding both nervous and a little frantic at the same time. Her tone actually takes the edge off of Oliver's anger for the moment. He has every right to be incredibly pissed off at her, but he also knows she's a mother whose child was kidnapped in the middle of the night by assassins. Her terror is palpable.

"Where's my son, Ollie?" she asks.

"You mean our son?" he shoots back, his voice tight and anger barely reigned in. She freezes at that, turns a few shades paler and he can see her gulp. She opens her mouth like she's going to say something, but can't find the words. There's a strangled little noise in her throat instead of words and he knows, knows that this is pretty much her worst nightmare come to life.

"MOM!" Connor shouts, barrelling out of the kitchen and past Oliver to throw himself into his mother's arms. She clings to him immediately, crying into her son's hair and kissing him over and over on the crown of his head. In a lot of ways, Sandra has failed their son. Oliver knows that. But in this way… at least it's obvious that she loves the boy madly. And that's something. It's a lot, in fact.

"You're okay?" she's asking, pulling back to look Connor over and stroke the sides of his face. "Con? You're not hurt, right? God, I was so scared, baby."

"I'm fine, mom," Connor assures her, not fighting at all as she tugs him back into her arms. "Nyssa saved me from the other guy. She's badass."

"Language, Con," Sandra says automatically, but there's no weight to her words and Connor disregards them entirely.

"And Oliver and Felicity helped keep me safe, too. They're pretty cool, I guess," Connor says, pulling away from his mother slightly to look her in the eye. "I mean, Oliver can fight with a sword. That's kind of awesome… Right?"

He's working his way up to asking her something. It's painfully obvious. Oliver knows it. Sandra knows it. Even standing on the opposite side of the room, Felicity probably knows it, too.

"Why don't you come in and sit down," Oliver offers them.

"Yes, that's… probably better than lingering in your doorway," Sandra agrees, looking up at Oliver with no small measure of nervousness. "Thank you."

Oliver can't quite get himself to say 'you're welcome,' but he does nod back with thinned lips before shutting the door behind Sandra and Connor.

"Sandra, this is Felicity Smoak, my girlfriend," Oliver introduces, gesturing towards Felicity, who crosses the room to shake Sandra's hand.

"Yes, I've… seen you on television occasionally," Sandra says, anxious smile firmly in place. "It's
nice to meet you."

"You, too," Felicity says kindly, an awkward silence filling the space as she steps back. "Can I... get
you anything? Water or... I dunno, some wine? Because, wow, I'd really like a glass of wine if I
were in your shoes. Actually, I kind of want one in my shoes, too. Do you like cabernet sauvignon?
Or merlot? I mean, I know that's sort of cliche these days, but so what, right?"

"Felicity, honey," Oliver smiles at her, shaking his head affectionately.

"It's five o'clock somewhere, Oliver," she tells him. "It's five o'clock somewhere and if ever there
were a time for day-drinking, I'm going to go out on a limb and say this is it."

"I'll have a glass if you are," Sandra jumps in. "That actually... that sounds nice."

Rambles and borderline inappropriateness aside, Felicity might have had the right idea, Oliver
realizes. Sandra's hands are shaking with nerves and she's looking a little bit wild-eyed, like a
cornered animal. They're not going to have any kind of meaningful conversation until she's a little
more at ease. Luckily, putting people at ease is something Felicity is spectacularly good at.

"The cab or...?" Felicity asks, question dangling in the air.

"That's fine," Sandra answers.

"I guess I'll have one, too," Oliver says.

"After your criticism of our day-drinking? I dunno, Oliver. That seems a little hypocritical of you,"
Felicity admonishes.

"Do you want an apology or something?" he asks, blinking at her.

"I mean... I wouldn't say no," Felicity replies, mulling it over.

"Felicity," Oliver says, raising his eyebrows at her.

"Fine, fine... I'll be right back," she tells him. "Connor, you want to help me carry a glass? That's
legal, right? I mean, he's not drinking it. That's not contributing to the delinquency of a minor or
anything, right? Maybe I'll just pour in here and he can carry empty glasses."

"It's fine," Sandra assures her. "Con, why don't you go give Felicity a hand, okay?"

Connor still has a question on the tip of his tongue, but he's not quite ready to ask it, apparently,
because he nods and follows Felicity back into the kitchen, leaving Sandra and Oliver alone in
uneasy silence.

"Never thought I'd see the day you objected to day-drinking, Ollie," Sandra says with an uneven
laugh.

He doesn't laugh. He can't. There are already words on his tongue that he needs to ask and there's no
room for laughter right now.

"How could you lie to me like that?" he asks.

She freezes, looks to the side and swallows hard.

"He's my son, Sandra, and you lied to me. You told me that he died," Oliver presses.
"I know," she says after a moment, her voice quiet, barely audible. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Did you think… did you think that was what I wanted? Did you think I'd be a bad father to him?" Oliver asks.

"God, no, Ollie, that's not…" Sandra starts, sighing hard. "I didn't know what to think."

"Then how could you?!" he demands. "I don't understand, so I'm going to need you to explain it to me. What the hell made you decide it was in his best interests to hide his existence from me!"

"Do you… do you have any idea how terrifying your mother was, Ollie?" she ventures. "I was eighteen, my mother kicked me out the second she realized I was pregnant, you had a girlfriend and we weren't… we weren't anything."

"I'd told you," Oliver insists. "I'd told you that didn't matter. That I'd be there for my child."

"And what would you have done if your family hadn't been there for you?" Sandra insists. "Your mother… your mother paid me two million dollars to disappear with Connor. If I'd turned that down… what would she have done? Would she have cut you off, like my family did to me? Could you have stood by me and Connor then? And if you had, we'd have been broke and you would have hated me for destroying your relationships with your girlfriend and your family!"

"That wasn't your choice to make," Oliver snaps at her. "I deserved to know I had a son. I deserved a chance to be a part of his life and he deserved that, too, Sandra."

"I did what I thought was in all of our best interests at the time," Sandra insists. "Was I wrong? Looking back… yes, probably I was. But I was young and terrified and alone and your mother gave me a way out. I took it. I can't change that now."

"So you told my son that his father was dead?" Oliver asks, face twisting in disbelief and pain even as he says the words.

"You were!" She reminds him. "To the whole world, you were. For years, Ollie, I thought you were dead just like everyone else."

"And when I came back? When you found out I wasn't?" Oliver prods.

"Then I had no idea who you were anymore!" she shouts. "You'd been marooned on an island for half a decade! Were you sane? Were you stable? I had no idea. And your mother was still there and you had enough to deal with and Connor was seven and he already knew his father was dead so how was I supposed to tell him any differently?"

"You did what was easier for you," Oliver decides, his eyes pinning her in place. "You didn't want to admit that you'd lied. To me or to him. So you kept lying because it was the easy way out."

"That's not fair!" Sandra insists.

"No. You know what's not fair? Telling me and my son both that the other one is dead," Oliver snaps at her.

It's only because of the increasingly ashen look on Sandra's face and her gaze fixed steadily past him that Oliver realizes Connor is back. When he turns, Connor's standing in the kitchen doorway with Felicity at his side, two empty wine glasses in his hands and a look of so much excruciating pain on his face that it physically hurts Oliver to see it. 
"Connor… baby, it's not-" Sandra starts, taking a stilted step towards him.

"You lied to me?" Connor asks, looking younger than he really is for all the pain and vulnerability on his face.

"It's… it's complicated, honey," Sandra tells him.

"Either you lied to me or you didn't, mom. That's not so complicated," he tells her. "Is… is Oliver my dad?"

It takes a beat or two but Sandra nods, softly first, then firmer, her voice choking out a quiet 'yes' in a sound that's scarcely more than a whisper. Connor's brow knits and his eyes dart to Oliver, his expression something Oliver can't quite decipher. He's not sure what he's supposed to do here, what he's supposed to say. So he smiles, a tight-lipped nervous gesture that Connor mirrors before blinking hard and looking away for a moment.

"I can explain, Con," Sandra starts.

But Connor's having none of it. He shoves the two glasses he's holding to Felicity, who manages somehow to grab hold of them.

"I'm gonna go sit with Nyssa and Thea," he mumbles, not looking at anyone as he hurries away.

And this, too, Oliver thinks, is something Connor got from him. He had a long history of running from his problems, once.

"God damn it," Sandra says, sitting heavily on the couch and covering her face with her hands.

As mad as he at her - and he is - Oliver can't help but feel a little bit sorry for Sandra. Because… yes, his mother had been scary. And yes, they had been young and he'd been anything but reliable. He's nowhere near ready to forgive Sandra. He might never be. But he can understand why she did what she did. And he's definitely able to muster some sympathy towards her for Connor's reaction.

"It's going to take time," Oliver tells her and Felicity pours some wine.

Sandra lets out a wet laugh, humorless and pained.

"His whole life it's just been me and him," she tells Oliver. "And he's always had this notion that… that we tell each other everything. I have no idea where he got that from, but he did. And I'm… I'm a fraud to him now. I don't know how time makes that better."

From Thea, Oliver thinks immediately. Connor gets his obsession with the truth from his aunt. Somehow. It's fascinating to him, these little bits of people he's loved showing themselves in his son. His sister's value for the truth, his mother's jaw, his father's expressions - they're all there in Connor.

"Here," Felicity says, handing the other woman a glass of wine.

"Thank you," Sandra says shakily.

"You make it better by promising him you won't lie to him anymore," Oliver tells her. "And then you keep that promise."

Sandra looks at him, eyes red and cheeks wet. It is, he thinks, the first time she's really looked at him since she walked in the door. She's not seeing Ollie. Not now. She's seeing Oliver. And she's realizing she doesn't know him at all.
"And you're not going to… you're not going to remind him how I lied to him and tell him what a horrible person I am for the rest of his life?" she asks, vulnerable and scared all at once.

"We're family, Sandra. I'm angry with you, yes, but you're his mother," Oliver reminds her, settling into the seat next to her. "And, in spite everything, he seems like a really great, happy kid. I don't want to do anything to come between the two of you. I just want to find space for me to be a part of his life, too."

She's wary. Rightly so, probably. If he wanted full custody, Oliver is almost positive he could get it with little problem. His resources undoubtedly far outstrip hers. But he doesn't want full custody. He's not sure what he wants, exactly, but not that.

"Okay," Sandra says, nodding at him.

"Okay?" Oliver asks.

"Okay, we'll work something out," she clarifies.

A surge of relief runs through him at that. Sandra could have made this very difficult had she wanted to. It lessens tension he hadn't even realized he'd had to know that she intends to be reasonable about everything.

A hand settles on his shoulder and Oliver looks up to see Felicity with a pride-filled smile and a glass of wine in her other hand. He takes it and smiles back.

"I'm going to go see if Connor wants to talk, if that's okay with you two?" Felicity ventures. "Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone who's not your parent, you know?"

"Thank you," Oliver says, resting his hand on top of hers and giving it a little squeeze.

"Let him know that if he does want to talk to me, I'm here?" Sandra requests.

"You got it," Felicity agrees easily before heading back toward the guest room.

Oliver can't help watching her go.

"So…" Sandra starts, pulling his attention back to her. "You two are the real deal then, huh?"

He smiles at that. He can't not. His eyes crinkle and he pins his lips together to hold in his delight because… yes… they are and even just thinking about that fact brings more joy to his life than he'd have thought possible.

"Good for you," Sandra nods, sounding fully sincere. "Who would've thought… Ollie Queen would end up here."

"Not me," Oliver admits, eyebrows raised as he laughs a little. "But then I didn't exactly take the easy path through life the last eight years or so."

"No… no you didn't," she agrees. "And that's something we should talk about."

"How so?" Oliver asks, not quite sure where she's going with this.

"You're right. I have to be done lying to Connor," Sandra tells him. "But if we're going to do this - really do this - we need to be on the same page about everything. Whether it's just… occasional visits on holidays or if you want to arrange for Connor to come up on weekends or whatever, if we're going to both be his parents, we need to be a team about it."
"Okay," Oliver agrees.

"Honestly, from where I'm sitting, Felicity should probably be a part of this conversation, too. You
live together right?" Sandra asks, coughing a little at the end.

"Yes," Oliver tells her. "Actually, over lunch Connor asked-

Sandra interrupts by coughing harder.

"I'm sorry, I just-" she says, breaking out into another coughing fit. "Asthma. I'm really sensitive to
smells. Is something burning?"

"Earlier, Felicity tried to…” Oliver starts before his voice trails off.

Because he does smell something and it doesn't smell like Felicity's cooking disaster from earlier. It's
smoky and vaguely smells of ammonia and it takes Oliver just a couple of seconds to realize what it
is.

"Get down!" he shouts just before the front door explodes inwards.

Chapter End Notes

FYI, homemade mac and cheese is fairly easy to make from scratch but would also be
pretty easy to burn. Felicity and Oliver weren't exactly stocking Kraft in their kitchen...
I'm going to aim for another chapter by the end of the weekend, but that's crazy
ambitious so don't consider that a promise, please!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Back to work starting tomorrow so this crazy updating pace can't continue. Probably the next chapter will be up at the end of next weekend. Until then, enjoy (and thank you to Lizzie for the proofing/brainstorming)!

Oliver's ears are ringing and his eyes sting, but his survival instinct far surpasses his current discomfort. He hadn't waited for Sandra to respond before pulling her to the ground, which was probably for the best given the thick haze of smoke polluting the air and the way she's currently violently coughing and wheezing.

"Stay down," he commands her sharply as he crouches low next to her side.

It's an unnecessary order. She's not capable of much more than reaching for her inhaler at the moment. But Oliver is running purely on adrenaline and muscle-memory at this point.

They're under attack. His son is here. And his son's mother and Felicity and Thea. And the single ally he has nearby is Nyssa, who is currently in a drugged sleep in his guest room. There's no Digg, no Roy, no Sara and he's got entirely too many people to protect. The only reason he's not currently panicking is the near decade-long span of life-or-death experiences he has under his belt.

He's short on weapons at the moment, he realizes. That's not ideal, but it's okay. He can cope. He's a weapon unto himself and he knows it. Still, as the smoke starts to clear and he sees their attacker is most definitely armed, he'd much prefer having a bow in his hands or knife or something to help even the odds.

It's Al Mobaath standing in the haze, sword in hand as his eyes skim the room. He's masked, but Oliver knows those eyes, knows them like he knows his own, and he's fully aware that Al Mobaath's identity is a weapon all on its own.

It definitely hits him where it hurts.

Their eyes meet through the haze and there is nothing of Tommy in the other man's gaze. It is cold and malicious and Oliver knows better than to think he can get through to him. Not here, not now, anyhow.

"Step aside," Al Mobaath orders.

He doesn't wait for Oliver to respond, though. He must read something in his face, or maybe there's some part of him that remembers Oliver, knows he won't give up, because he lashes out with the sword instantly, slicing toward Oliver.

Sandra shrieks, a raspy, cough-laden noise, but Oliver is too busy reacting to take note of that. He grabs a nearby lamp, yanking it from the wall and whipping the cord toward Al Mobaath's sword, wrapping it around the steel and diverting its path.

There's a push and pull between them for a moment, Al Mobaath trying to wrench his sword back and Oliver keeping firm hold of the lamp and hoping the cord holds out against the sharpened blade.
It does, somewhat miraculously.

With a grumble of frustration, Al Mobaath tosses the sword to the side and charges Oliver instead. Oliver lunges too and the two meet somewhere in the middle where the remnants of the coffee table Felicity liked so much now lays in splinters.

He can hear her, Felicity, back in the guest room, shouting at Connor that he needs to stay put. It only serves to fuel him more, remind him what he has to lose because - God - does he have a lot to lose these days.

Oliver and the man wearing Tommy's face exchange a series of moves and countermoves. He's being tested. He knows it. Al Mobaath is sizing him up, learning his skill set, his weak spots, tracking his moves. But things escalate quickly and it takes every bit of Oliver's focus to hold his own against the assassin.

He almost misses the knife.

Truth be told, he won't be sure where Al Mobaath got it from, but luckily he spies it just in time. He pushes off of the assassin to give himself some leverage and vaults backwards in a move that undoubtedly looks more polished and practiced than it really is. It leaves Sandra out in the open though, it leaves his son's mother vulnerable, and that is fully unacceptable.

Luckily, Al Mobaath seems wholly uninterested in the woman, who has finally regained her breath and is scrambling on her hands and knees towards the corner. He's too focused on Oliver.

"You don't need to die here," Al Mobaath tells him, lazily easing towards him. "It isn't you I'm after."

"If you think I'm going to step aside and let you endanger this city, hurt people I care about, you really don't remember anything about me," Oliver counters.

This is, in fact, a bad move. Because Al Mobaath takes it as the opening that it is. He pulls off his mask, leaving Tommy's face staring at Oliver. It's a weapon, as surely as his sword was. Tommy's face is a strike to the gut.

"Oh my God," Sandra gasps from the other side of the room at the reveal of Tommy's face.

"Yes… you're a protector, aren't you Ollie?" Al Mobaath asks, continuing his slow pace towards Oliver. "Like you protected Tommy."

"I would have done… anything to save Tommy," Oliver asserts, his voice grittier than he'd like.

"And yet instead you watched him die. You watched me die, Ollie. Because you were too late. Because you couldn't give enough," Al Mobaath taunts, twisting Tommy's face into a mimicry of expression. "Because you're not the hero you pretend to be. Tommy knew that."

And that hurts, hurts in exactly the way that Al Mobaath wants it to, but it also tells Oliver more than he'd intended. He remembers. He might not be Tommy, exactly, but he remembers. Some of it, anyhow. Bits and pieces. There's a kind of hope in that.

But Oliver can't afford to be distracted. Not now. Not when he's being studied for weakness.

He and Al Mobaath start moving again at the same moment. Al Mobaath lunges with the knife while Oliver rolls to the side and Sandra shrieks in the background.
It's not an aimless roll, though. Oliver has a goal.

He moves swiftly, knowing he has little time. One hard yank on the curtain rod breaks it free from the wall. Not his best weapon ever, surely, but it's something and it's more than enough to give Al Mobaath reason to pause.

The curtains slide off the rod easily and Oliver swings the makeshift staff with precision and intent. Staves have never been his weapon of choice, but they are Sara's and he's never been quite so grateful for the opportunity to spar with her before. Al Mobaath dodges most of the swings, working his way backwards with careful footwork as he avoids Oliver's attack.

It's fast. A blur of metal and flesh. If he were so inclined, Oliver would have taken note of a very shocked looking Sandra from the other side of the room, but he's too focused to care about that. He's not too focused, however, to realize when the door to the guest room opens and Connor tries to barrel out. Neither, unfortunately, is Al Mobaath.

The smile that works its way across Tommy's face is terrifying.

"MOM!" Connor shouts, clearly terrified for his mother as Thea and Felicity both grab him and try to haul him back into the room.

Oliver's not really sure if Al Mobaath is focused on Thea or Connor, but either way there's a primal need in his gut to distract him. He has to keep them safe, has to.

Al Mobaath takes a big step back and Oliver watches as the man's pulls his arm back, muscles tight and grip solid on the knife. He's going to throw it. He's going to throw it and Oliver knows it.

What follows feels like slow motion, like the air is thick and Oliver is moving a fraction of a second too slowly. Al Mobaath releases the knife, sending it spinning in the direction of the guest room and the three people Oliver cares most about protecting in the entire world.

He swings the curtain rod. The first pass misses the knife entirely, a woosh of air and distinct lack of metal-on-metal clang filling the air, but the back end of the rod connects, knocking the knife harmlessly to the side.

"You can't keep them safe forever, Oliver," Al Mobaath says with a sharp laugh. "How long until you're a little too late, a little too slow? Again?"

"I will be faster than you, better than you and stronger than you for as long as I have to be," Oliver tells him in a low growl.

"Tommy… Tommy, you don't want to do this."

It's Thea's voice from the doorway, but Oliver doesn't dare turn to look. What his sister thinks she's doing, he has no idea. They aren't going to convince him of anything right now, not with words. Whatever has turned Tommy into Al Mobaath is considerably more complicated than that. But… but Thea is Thea. And of course she's going to try to appeal to him.

"Al Sa-Her's heir… you will bleed for your father's sins," he tells her as Oliver tries to step between them and break his line of sight.

"You're my brother, Tommy," Thea implores. "You're my big brother. You were even before I knew you were by blood and I cannot believe that there's not some part of you that feels that, that knows that. You don't want to hurt me, Tommy. And you don't want to hurt Ollie's son."
To Oliver's surprise, there's a split second of hesitance on Al Mobaath's face. It's fleeting, barely there, but he sees it. His pulse flutters at that, a racing tattoo that surges with hope that he fights to tamp back down. Because it's not enough. An instant of recognition is little in the grand scheme of things when Al Mobaath is still clearly angling to destroy everyone Oliver cares about.

But he can't not try.

"Let us help you," Oliver offers, backing up a step, staff still at the ready.

It's a disbelieving look and a sneer that doesn't suit Tommy's face at all that serves as an answer. But they're at an impasse, each waiting for the other to make a move, both looking for an opening to strike.

If he could just knock Al Mobaath out. If he could capture him somehow, start trying to undo whatever Ra's has done to him. If only…

"Dad!" Connor shouts, in what is probably the most jarring moment of Oliver's life, as Al Mobaath dives for his sword and swipes it in Oliver's direction.

Oliver jumps back just in time, the sword slicing through his shirt but not his skin.

"Tommy. Al Mobaath," Thea snaps, her voice hard and firm.

It's the look on Tommy's face that makes Oliver turn to see his sister. And what a sight she is, focused and determined holding his spare bow with an arrow nocked and pointed solidly at Al Mobaath.

"You will leave my family alone," she hisses.

Whatever Al Mobaat had been counting on from Thea, this clearly wasn't it. He's outnumbered now, Oliver and Thea both armed and defensive, fighting on their home turf.

"Put down the sword and give up now," Oliver orders.

"The demon never accepts defeat," he counters, stepping backwards towards the blown out door with his saber still in hand.

He's going to get away. He's going to escape and Oliver can't follow because what if it's a trap? What if he's intentionally luring him away so some henchmen can swoop in and grab Thea and Connor? He can't risk that. Not even for Tommy. But letting him get away puts them right back at square one with everyone in danger and Tommy nowhere to be found.

"Shoot him," Oliver orders as the possibilities play through his mind.

"What?" Thea asks, eyes darting to her brother as she keeps the arrow nocked and pointed at Al Mobaath.

"God damn it, Speedy, shoot him," Oliver repeats more insistently.

He will wonder for a very long time what would have happened next if Thea hadn't hesitated. If she'd shot Al Mobaath in the knee, incapacitated him, could they have avoided all of the complications to come? Ultimately, though, it doesn't matter.

Because she does hesitate.

And because Laurel has incredibly bad timing.
There's concern on her face as she appears in the blown-out doorway, but it quickly morphs into something else, something gut-wrenching and traumatized. This is, without a doubt, the very worst way Oliver can think of for her to find out that Tommy's a little less dead than she'd thought.

"Oh my… Tommy?" she manages, hand over her mouth and paler than Oliver's ever seen her.

Her fingers are shaking. He can see it from where he's standing. And, yes, this is all going to be incredibly overwhelming for her on a lot of levels, but Oliver's concern for the immediate future is not his friend's mental state. Not at the moment.

"Don't! Laurel!" Oliver snaps as she takes a half step forward towards Al Mobaath.

Something in his tone must break through the haze of shock that's clouded Laurel's vision because she does stop. She stops and she looks at Oliver's slightly panicked face before looking back to Al Mobaath and looking at him, really looking at him. And, somewhat terrifyingly, he's looking right back.

"Tommy?" she asks, her voice more uncertain than before.

She's only a pace away, though, and Al Mobaath is nothing if not opportunistic, apparently, because rather than answer her, he grabs her and uses her as a human shield, sword pressed firmly to her neck. Oliver lets out a long string of impressive cursing in Russian and adjusts his grip on the curtain rod.

"Not Tommy, sweetheart," Al Mobaath says against Laurel's ear.

"Some part of you is," Oliver appeals, drawing the assassin's gaze to himself. "And hurting her is the last thing in this world that Tommy would want."

"You appear to have idealized Tommy's feelings about her," Al Mobaath replies smoothly as he lets some of Laurel's hair drift through his fingers. "Things didn't end quite so simply as you seem to remember, even if he did die to save her."

Whether due to those words said in Tommy's voice or the sword to her neck, Laurel lets out a sob, tears welling up in her terrified eyes. Anxiety slices through Oliver like a knife. There's too many variables here. Too many people. And he doesn't know how to wrench Laurel free from Al Mobaath. Not now.

"You aren't after her," Oliver reminds Al Mobaath, perhaps a little desperately.

"You're right," he agrees. "I'm after the blood of the traitor. If you'd care to make a trade…"

"No," Oliver snaps.

"If you'll leave Connor out of this," Thea says at the same time.

"Thea… no," Oliver growls back at his sister as Al Mobaath gives an intrigued look and tilts his head appraisingly.

"What am I supposed to do, Ollie? Let Laurel suffer in my place?" Thea demands. "Have my nephew terrified that ninja assassins are going to pop out of the woodwork to grab him at any moment?"

There is no universe in which Oliver will let his sister give herself up. Tommy knew that and apparently Al Mobaath does as well because he abandons his pursuit of a trade suddenly and
"I'll give you some time to think over your options," he tells Oliver, shifting some, Laurel still braced in front of him and sword still to her neck.

Before Oliver has a chance to really think over what that means, Al Mobaath tosses something towards the window. It's small and has a blinking light on it and it takes Oliver only a fraction of a second to realize it's another bomb.

He dives towards the guest room doorway, barrelling into Felicity and Connor, taking them both down and shielding them with his body as the blast hits and the glass shatters into splinters that rain down on the street below. The force of the blast knocks Thea back and she stumbles over Oliver back into the guest room.

It's chaos. Plaster and insulation blankets the room, showers down on all of them leaving a pink and white sheen on everything. Sandra is shouting frantically for Connor and Connor is crying and Laurel is screaming with a kind of terror that Oliver has never heard.

He'd left himself vulnerable in tackling Felicity and Connor. He'd known it even when he was doing it. His back was to Al Mobaath, who had a sword in hand, and he could have suddenly, definitively lost.

But that didn't happen.

That didn't happen and Oliver asks himself again how much of Tommy is left in Al Mobaath because instead of striking him down, Al Mobaath takes Laurel and escapes through the blown out window, firing a grappling hook off of his belt to the building across the street.

Oliver recovers quickly, scrambling to his feet and running to the edge of the room where there's now a steep dropoff to the street below. He can hear the echo of Laurel's shrill scream even as she disappears from sight, she and Al Mobaath crashing through a window in the building across the street.

"сукин сын. как это происходит?" Oliver says emphatically, fists clenched at his side and frustration readily apparent.

"Mom! Are you okay?" Connor asks, running across the room to his mother's arms.

Oliver turns to look at the pair as Felicity reaches his side and slips her hand into his.

"You're okay?" Sandra asks Connor, a little panicky as she runs her hands through his hair before pulling him close.

"I'm good, mom. I'm fine," Connor tells her, hugging her tightly.

She hugs him back and looks over his head toward Oliver, newfound wariness in her eyes.

"Who the hell are you?" she asks him accusingly. "What happened to you on that island?"

"I'm your son's father," Oliver replies. "And I'm someone who will do whatever it takes to protect the people I care about. That's all you need to be concerned with. I'm not going to let anything happen to Connor."

She looks anything but convinced, but that's not Oliver's most immediate problem. It's not even close really.
"Are you a ninja, too?" Connor asks suddenly looking back at Oliver.

"Ah… no," Oliver tells him. "Not a ninja."

"But you can fight," Connor says. "Like really fight. Like Nyssa can."

Oliver's eyes dart towards the guest room where Nyssa is still heavily sedated. Thea's in the doorway holding his bow and when Sandra sucks in a breath he knows she's not only followed his gaze but followed the breadcrumbs and put two and two together.

"Oh my god," Sandra says a little breathlessly.

His eyes snap back to her, expecting judgement or disgust or something, but Sandra's face is surprisingly blank. Her eyes are cautious but reserved like she's trying to sort things out but not jumping to conclusions. It's… it's a relief, honestly.

"I don't know you at all, do I?" she asks him.

"No," Oliver agrees. "You don't."

She bites her lip and nods at that. She doesn't know him, hasn't gotten him figured out. She knew Ollie once, but even then not particularly well. Truth be told, he doesn't know her at all either, really. But that's okay. She seems willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, possibly because he literally threw his body over their son to shield him from a bomb. But, whatever the reason, he's grateful.

"Ollie, what do we do now?" Thea asks, interrupting his thoughts and sounding as young as she is.

"теперь мы получаем подкрепление," he responds automatically.

"What?" Thea asks, blinking at him.

"Reinforcements," Oliver repeats in English. "Now we get reinforcements. And then we get Laurel and Tommy. This needs to end."

"I don't know you at all, do I?" she asks him.
"Queen Consolidated isn't safe enough," Oliver says, looking around the wreckage of the apartment.

"Shouldn't we go to the police?" Sandra asks, still stroking Connor's hair. "Can't they keep us safe? That's their job, after all."

"The police can't deal with this. They're relying on us," Oliver informs her with gravity, wincing as he realizes that he's going to have to be the one to tell Lance that Al Mobaath has grabbed Laurel.

Sandra looks - understandably - not at all comfortable with the notion of the police relying on them. She is, quite literally, a soccer mom. Her life revolves around her job and her son. The most dangerous part of her day, normally, is probably her morning commute to work. She isn't equipped to deal with this.

"We need somewhere for you four to lay low while we deal with this," Oliver tells Thea, Felicity, Sandra and Connor.

"How about, uh… your other office?" Thea suggests with a pointed look.

"No," Felicity says immediately. "Tommy knew about it and knew where it was. Al Mobaath just proved pretty decisively that he remembers Tommy's life. Or, parts of it anyhow. It wouldn't be safe there."

"I don't understand any of this," Sandra says. "What happened to Tommy? Why is he after Connor? Why is he after any of you?"

"We can talk about that later," Felicity tells her. "A lot. All of the talking. We'll have plenty of time for that. But first we need to get somewhere safe… with excellent computers and internet access because I'm not giving up the role of Oliver's tech support just because I can't be at… the other office."

"I can help, Ollie," Thea tells him, stepping forward, glass crunching under her designer shoes. "I've spent nearly a year running from the League and I'm tired of running, I don't want to be that person anymore. I've trained. I can fight and shoot. I can help."

"No," Oliver tells her decisively. "You can't."
"Ollie-" she starts again.

"You hesitated, Thea," he counters and she freezes at his words. "You can't hesitate in the field. And you did."

"Are you blaming me for being reluctant to shoot my brother?" Thea asks him with an angry and disbelieving edge to her voice.

"No," Oliver tells her. "No… I'm not blaming you. But I am saying you shouldn't be in the field. Not yet. And besides, he's after you. Leaving you in the open is a bad tactical move."

Thea doesn't look appeased. At all. But she does stop arguing her point and that's enough for Oliver. For now.

"So what's our move?" Felicity asks, looking up at Oliver.

"We have two options..." he tells her, stretching out some of the tension in his neck as he speaks. "Waller or Anatoly… and I'd much prefer not owing Waller any favors."

"Who are Waller and Anatoly?" Sandra asks uneasily.

"Waller is the head of ARGUS," Felicity tells her as if that explains everything.

"And ARGUS is..." Sandra asks, voice trailing off as she speaks.

"Super secret spy agency. Or, well, I guess not-so-super-secret spy agency since we're talking about it," she muses in reply. "They've got the resources to keep us safe from Al Mobaath and the League and they definitely have the computers I'd need, but Waller is tricky. She already told Oliver that she didn't have any inclination to help with our League problem. And even if we could talk her into giving us sanctuary, she's not exactly what you'd call reliable as an ally. She's too 'big picture' for that."

"And Anatoly?" Sandra asks, looking like she's not sure she wants the answer.

"He's the Pakhan," Oliver tells her.

"Of the Bratva?" she asks stunned.

"What's the Bratva?" Connor asks.

"It's..." Oliver starts, but finds he can't answer his son.

"It's the Russian mob," Sandra says, with no such reservations. "Oliver, how can we possibly count on the mob to keep us safe? It's the mob."

"I need you to trust me," he tells her gravely, which isn't an answer at all.

It's dead-silent for a moment, Sandra watching Oliver across the ruins of the living room and him staring back, all piercing eyes and tense frame. The room is a wreck, the trail of destruction continuing well beyond the confines of Queen Consolidated, and a high-pitched echoing wail of sirens drifts up from the city streets below the blown-out window.

But they're still standing.

"I'm trying," Sandra tells him finally.
"That's all I can ask," Oliver replies.

There's nothing but an unnatural breeze whistling through the room and the distant sirens filling the air for a moment. The near-silence is unsettling. Wind swirls powdery bits of plaster and insulation around their feet and Oliver tries very hard not to think about the destruction of the relative-quiet of his life being so vividly demonstrated.

"I thought Anatoly wasn't in town until tomorrow?" Felicity asks, filling the awkward silence.

"He's not, but he has people here," Oliver says.

"The people he's coming to rein in?" Felicity asks hesitantly.

She has a point. He knows this. But their options are slim.

"I know who to lean on," Oliver tells her. "And without Anatoly there, they'll follow my directions. When he does show up, he'll back me up."

Oliver's sure of this. Fully. Anatoly takes the idea of the brotherhood very seriously and very literally. And there is nothing Anatoly won't do for family.

"Besides," he adds, "they know he's coming because they messed up. It is absolutely in their best interests to make a good impression on him and helping me does that."

"Okay," Felicity agrees. "But there's two issues with that. One of them is in a drugged sleep and the other is… occupying the bathroom. I'm not sure how we get them out of the building undetected. Or at all. Because, I mean you're all muscly and all and I have no doubt you can fireman-carry her, but if Nyssa wakes up while you're doing that I'm pretty sure it ends badly for you."

Oliver huffs a laugh. She's not wrong.

"I'll call Lyla to keep an eye on the two of them while we relocate you guys. Nyssa should be awake soon, anyhow," Oliver tells her.

"This would be so much easier if Barry were available," Felicity sighs. "We could just zoom everybody to Star Labs and go into lockdown there. Even if Al Mobaath could track us there and get in, it would take him a while to get back to Central City."

"Zoom to Star Labs!" Connor asks, standing a little straighter, excitement practically vibrating in his little body. "Like the Flash? Do you know the Flash? Is his name Barry? He's so cool. Do you think I could meet him?"

Felicity winces because… obviously a ten-year-old kid from Central City is going to put those pieces together and be fully aware of who the Flash is. She's going to have to tell Barry she accidentally sort of gave up his identity to an elementary schooler.Oops?

But Oliver's reaction nearly makes that worth it.

He just sort of looks at Connor and… blinks rapidly. Because of course his kid is a Flash fan. Felicity's pretty sure that Oliver has never wanted to out his identity more than in this moment. He wants his son's approval, wants him to have that look of excitement and pride for him, and it strikes Felicity how very far Oliver has come in accepting this boy as his son in such a short time.

"Tell you what," Oliver offers. "Promise to keep all of that a secret and I'll make sure you get to meet him after all this is over, okay?"
Connor literally jumps with excitement, bouncing on his toes with bottled up energy and anticipation.

"Mom! Did you hear that? I'm gonna get to meet the Flash! I can't even believe it!" Connor says grinning hugely before turning and barrelling toward Oliver, hugging him for all he's worth.

Oliver's breath catches in his throat and, after a fraction of a second of surprise, his arms close around the boy.

"Thanks, Oliver… dad," Connor says against his chest, testing out the word in a quieter, mumbled voice.

Oliver's eyes slam shut at that, too many ill-defined emotions welling up in him at his son's acknowledgement and affection. He doesn't know how to deal with this. Didn't know he wanted this. Not this much. But it means so very much. It means everything.

"I'd do anything for you, Connor," Oliver tells the boy, his voice quiet. "Anything at all. Introducing you to the Flash… that's easy. Okay? Just… stay safe. Listen to your mom and Felicity and when this is through we'll meet him together."

"Okay," Connor says, face still pressed against Oliver's middle.

He seems reluctant to let go now that he's accepted Oliver as his dad, taken that first step towards a connection between them. But, then, so is Oliver. Felicity and Thea look on with pleased smiles. Sandra bites back her own smile, but snifflies and swipes at unexpected tears clouding her vision.

She hadn't expected this. Ever. Hadn't thought Connor would ever even know who his father was, much less have the two of them form any kind of relationship. It means more to her than she'd have thought to see this happen for her son.

"We need to get moving," Oliver says reluctantly, resting his hand on Connor's shoulder as the boy pulls back slightly, but doesn't step away. "Felicity, if you could call Lyla?"

"On it," Felicity confirms, pulling out her phone and stepping to the side.

"After you're done with that…" Oliver starts, then sighs and stretches his neck, thinking things through. "After calling Lyla, give Pamela a call, please?"

"I was already planning on it," Felicity informs him. "What's first on your to-do list?"

That's a toss-up, really. Anatoly, the local Russian contacts, or Lance. Oh man he doesn't want to have this conversation with Lance. The choice, ultimately, is taken away from him though when the elevator dings from down the hall and Lance and Bryce appear in the rubble of the blown-out doorway.

"What the hell happened here, Queen?" Lance asks bewildered, his gun drawn and eyes skimming the room with practiced precision.

"Detectives," Oliver sighs as Felicity steps into the other room to call Lyla, shooting him a sympathetic look as she goes. "You'd better take a seat."
It's dark when she wakes up and the terror that grips Laurel slides down her spine like ice water.

She's tied up and blindfolded, she realizes after a moment when she tries to stretch her arms and can't. She doesn't know where she is. The last thing she remembers is zipping through the air dozens of stories from the ground and rapidly closing in on solid glass window. It feels like a dream, like a nightmare, but there was Tommy… Tommy but not Tommy… and she can't process that, can't make that make sense.

And yet… and yet even in the dark she knows it happened. Her body aches from the impact with the window and she's pretty sure she's got a few cuts from the glass as it shattered. Nothing feels broken, which she should be grateful for, but the sense of panic that blooms in her gut overwhelms everything else.

"Tommy?" she asks, her voice quiet and wavering under the weight of hope and fear.

"I told you," comes a painfully familiar voice from her left, "I'm not Tommy, sweetheart."

"Who are you then?" she ventures boldly, setting her jaw and tilting her head in the direction of the voice.

For a moment, she thinks he's not going to respond. In fact, she starts to wonder if he's just left her there, in the dark tied to a chair. But then there's a rustle of fabric and she can hear his breathing. He's close to her, so close, and maybe he's not entirely Tommy but she saw his face. She knows. He's not entirely not Tommy, either. And, whole or not, his nearness, the life in him, it's enough to make something ache deep in her bones.

She jolts when fingers skim her face. They're rough and calloused, not the hands she remembers, but she scarcely has time to think about that because those unfamiliar fingers pull away the blindfold and she's left face-to-face with her captor.

The breath she sucks in rapidly turns into a sob and she tries to reach for his face instinctively before remembering she's still tied to a chair. She can't reach him - physically or otherwise, it seems - as he stares at her impassively, seemingly wholly unaffected by the way she's choking on her own breath and tears are welling up in her eyes.

"I am Al Mobaath," he tells her. "Not your Tommy. Tommy is dead."

"I don't understand… I don't understand," she says shaking her head in disbelief. "How… It's… I know those eyes. I know you."

He doesn't back up at all, just tilts his head as he watches her, his eyes calculating and cold. And that, more than anything, tells her there's some truth to what he's saying. Tommy was a lot of things, but unemotional was never, ever one of them.

"I am born of the waters of the Lazarus Pit and molded by Ra's Al Ghul to serve the League of Assassins, to bring the pain of retribution to Al Sa-her before ending him," he informs her. "I might house within me some echoes of memories from this body's previous life, but I am Warith Al Ghul, heir to the demon. There is nothing left of your Tommy."

"Then why did you take me?" she challenges.

He blinks a little faster, the first sign of some kind of emotion from him that she's seen so far, and in spite of herself, a bit of hope wells up at that.

"You were convenient," he tells her dismissively after a beat.
"I don't believe you. I refuse to accept that," she breathes out, her words ghosting across his face as he has yet to back out of her personal space.

"Believe what you want, sweetheart," he tells her tauntingly. "You're important to them. All of them. You're leverage."

"You could have grabbed anyone in that room," she points out. "Sure, you'd have had a bit of a harder time getting at Thea or Felicity or… the kid."

"Oliver's son," Al Mobaath supplies. "Connor Hawke."

"Okay… or Connor," Laurel acknowledges. "But the woman in the corner? Connor's mother, I presume? You could have easily grabbed her before I even got there. So why me?"

He doesn't answer, just stares back blankly, those beautiful eyes she knows so well boring into her, cold and empty.

"You don't know why, do you?" she breathes, excitement welling up in her as she realizes she's right.

"You make a great mistake if you attribute any of motivations to some lingering sense of affection," he tells her with the barest hint of defensiveness in his voice.

"I don't believe that," she tells him, simultaneously terrified and excited as a flicker of anger shades his eyes.

It's emotion. It's something. She can work with that. She's a lawyer and a damned good one.

"You remember," she reminds him. "You already told me that. You can't convince me that those memories didn't play a part in why you took me."

"I remember Tommy looking through the window while you fucked his best friend," Al Mobaath points out and Laurel flinches. "I remember Tommy dying to save your life even after that."

"Yes," she agrees in a quiet voice, even though it hurts to hear those words out loud. "Because even after that he still loved me. If you think I don't know that you remember that too, you're wrong."

"He was weak," Al Mobaath says gruffly, which in no way contradicts her statement. "I am not."

"He was the best of all of us," Laurel counters proudly.

"You're infuriating," he grits out.

"You used to say that before, too," she points out. "But the context was usually a little different."

His nostrils actually flare at that and she can see the muscles of his jaw twitch. Something in her thrills with a sense of victory at that. She's reaching him, on some level. It's everything she dares to hope for.

"You can't tell me you don't remember that, Tommy," she pushes. "Like that time we went to France for a weekend just because you wanted to buy some wine and we ended up never even leaving the hotel room. Or that time we went dancing at that club in New York and I wore that blue dress with the slit up the side and you just couldn't help sliding your hand up-"

"I'm. Not. Tommy," he interrupts, practically hissing it in her face.
"Prove it," she commands, leaning forward so their noses are nearly touching.

There's a growl of frustration in his throat and Laurel's not entirely sure that she's not in over her head, but if she's going to drown in this then so be it. She will let this swallow her whole if that's what it takes to get Tommy back.

She knows he's going to kiss her before he does. He might not be fully Tommy, but there's enough of him there to be familiar. She knows what it means when his pupils go wide like that and his breathing speeds up, shallow and too fast.

When he does, it's hard, punishing, a fierce kiss the likes of which Tommy has never had with her. But his lips are familiar and the way his hands tangle in her hair to coax her head to tilt just so echoes of a thousand kisses before. His lips might say he's not Tommy, but everything else about him contradicts that. And, brutal or not, the force of that kiss pulls her down, drags her away in the undertow.

She wouldn't have it any other way.

She's dazed when he pulls away, but even with the post-kiss haze that's muddling her brain, she can see the confusion he's trying to mask. He doesn't know why he kissed her. She's sure of it.

"If that was supposed to prove there's nothing left of Tommy in you, it didn't," she tells him.

Something flashes in his eyes again but it's not entirely anger. Not now. There's other, more familiar things in his eyes as his gaze lazily drifts down towards his kiss-stung lips.

"I'm not the man you think I am," he says, catching her gaze again.

"Maybe. But you're not the man you think you are either," she counters.

He doesn't respond to that, instead standing abruptly and and hastily striding out of the barren room. Something in Laurel's very soul crows with victory at that.

She might be the one unarmed and tied to a chair, but he's the one left vulnerable.
Chapter Notes

Please note that Ra's is exactly as horrible in this fic as he is in canon. This means that his views are both misogynistic and homophobic. He's a terrible person. Obviously. I know a lot of people had trouble with that aspect of his character on the show, so I wanted to warn for it here even though it is more implied than anything else and my characters will always recognize that this is yet another disgusting element of his villainy. That said... enjoy! No update next weekend but definitely one the weekend after.

Nyssa wakes precisely as Lyla expected her to, startled and immediately defensive. Any soldier would wake like that in an unfamiliar place. She might not know Nyssa well, but it doesn't take a genius to realize that the two of them probably have more in common than not. They've both been at war for most of their lives, after all.

"Stand down," Lyla snaps crisply, swerving out of the way as not-completely-awake Nyssa lashes out at her. "I'm a friendly."

Nyssa freezes, either at Lyla's commanding tone or the clear order she's given, and she blinks at Lyla, shaking her head as if to clear it.

"You sedated me?" Nyssa asks, trying to sit fully and wincing as she unthinkingly puts weight on her injured arm.

"It was necessary," Lyla tells her.

"You ought not have done so," Nyssa counters. "Injured or not, there can be no rest while Al Mobaath hunts us. He will attack again."

"Yeah," Lyla agrees on a sigh. "You missed some things."

Nyssa's brow furrows, her features hardening as she forces herself to sit, taking more care to avoid further injuring her arm this time. Her eyes sweep the room. The door to the living room is dangling from its hinges and there is debris everywhere.

"What has happened," Nyssa demands, moving to stand. "Where is the boy?"

"Connor's safe," Lyla tells her as the other woman rises shakily to her feet before collapsing back onto the bed. "You should not be getting up yet."

"I am needed," Nyssa counters angrily, looking thoroughly frustrated with herself for her own injury. "I have no time to be coddled like a child. Pain is immaterial."

"Not if you pass out from it," Lyla points out knowingly.

"My mind is not so weak as that," Nyssa counters, sounding more than a little offended. "But it is of
no use debating now. What's done is done. You must tell me what has happened as I slumbered."

Lyla hesitates, the tight press of her lips together both grim and telling. It does nothing to ease the tension in Nyssa's frame.

"Let me take a look at your wound first, then I'll fill you in," Lyla tells her.

"My wound is fine," Nyssa tells her. "I have suffered much worse and undoubtedly will do so again. Now tell me what has happened!"

There's enough experience under Lyla's belt for her to stop and appraise the other woman. Nyssa is single-minded, focused - perhaps to a fault - and every bit consumed by her mission. That makes sense. For most of her life, that's been all that Nyssa has had, her constant. There will be no convincing her that her own well-being should take priority over that.

"Alright," Lyla agrees, standing stiffly with her arms crossed in front of her. "Al Mobaath attacked. Oliver fought him off but he escaped and took a hostage on his way out."

"The League does not take prisoners," Nyssa says, as if contradicting Lyla's version of events.

"And yet... he did," Lyla says pointedly.

"Whom did he take?" Nyssa asks. "You stated the child is safe."

"He is," Nyssa confirms. "Al Mobaath took Laurel... Sara's sister."

Nyssa pauses as this, her gaze flitting about the room unseeingly as she tries to make sense of this information. Lyla can practically see the wheels turning in the other woman's head.

"We must retrieve her," Nyssa says after a moment. "Before she falls victim to the League. Sara will not take well to the League capturing her sister."

Lyla hums speculatively as she eyes the other warrior.

"You're right, of course. But that's not what you were thinking," Lyla states with great certainty.

"You believe yourself privy to my thoughts?" Nyssa asks challengingly.

"I think that you know as well as I do that there's no good reason for Al Mobaath to take Laurel," Lyla levels with her. "I think that he did gives us a whole lot of information about our target."

"You believe him to still be Thomas Merlyn," Nyssa observes.

Lyla tilts her head in agreement but says nothing.

"You are mistaken," Nyssa declares. "He is reborn of the Lazarus Pit. He was conditioned and drugged for months on end, molded in his already weakened state to become precisely who my father wills him to be. He is not strong enough to withstand such treatment and retain his own sense of self. No man is."

"You have," Lyla observes.

Nyssa startles at this, pulls back and blinks at Lyla with extreme wariness and a guarded nature that Lyla has rarely seen outside of ARGUS or Oliver Queen.

"I have endured no such trials," Nyssa counters.
"You might not have died and been brought back to life, but you definitely spent years being conditioned and molded into the person your father wanted you to be only for you to decide to take your own path instead," Lyla points out. "If you managed it, why not him?"

"Our experiences are not the same," Nyssa insists. "I was merely raised within the League. Al Mobaath's treatment would have been substantially more… forced. You underestimate my father and the powers of the Lazarus Pit."

"Maybe," Lyla admits. "But I think it's at least as likely that he underestimated you and Tommy Merlyn."

"Tommy Merlyn is dead," Nyssa insists. "Believing otherwise is folly. Al Mobaath will use it against you and we will all pay for it with our blood."

"Well at least your dramatic flare wasn't injured."

Lyla had known that Sara was nearly back, had been expecting her and had seen the blonde woman out of the corner of her eye as she'd ventured past where the front door had once been on Oliver and Felicity's apartment. Nyssa, however, had clearly had no idea that her lover was back.

"Beloved, I-" Nyssa starts, her face contrite and laced with a desperation that reminds Lyla strongly of herself when she and Johnny had still been trying to work things out the first go around.

"Felicity said she was hurt. How badly?" Sara asks, directing the question to Lyla and ignoring Nyssa for the moment.

"It's nothing. Just a scratch. I've borne much worse and lived to tell of it," Nyssa protests.

"Very deep, six inch laceration on her right bicep that needed 33 stitches," Lyla informs her. "I had to sedate her. She should be in a sling or a cast."

"I will not immobilize my arm!" Nyssa counters fiercely. "Doing so would be akin to handing myself over to my father's men for slaughter."

"You could easily have nerve damage, Nyssa," Lyla points out. "You definitely need antibiotics and a tetanus shot. If it were up to me, you'd be in a hospital."

"It is not up to you," Nyssa reminds her sourly.

"Don't I get a say? Even a little?" Sara asks, her voice challenging and eyes harder than Lyla is used to seeing on the other woman's face. "Or have you already made up your mind to throw yourself right back into the fight? Which side will you be on this time, Nyssa?"

Nyssa retracts a little at that, looking younger than Lyla could have imagined. The woman has been an assassin since scarcely after she'd learned to spell her name, has spilled the blood of her father's enemies in more countries than not, and yet this - Sara's anger - is enough to give her pause, make her face crumble under the weight of vulnerability.

"You are displeased with me," Nyssa concedes. "Of course you are. I understand-"

"Well you're doing better than me, then," Sara interrupts, all anger and frustration. "Because I don't understand. You're going to have to explain it to me."

"Love is a weakness," Nyssa says after a moment, for the second time in as many interactions between them.
"Yes," Sara says dryly, folding her arms in front of herself. "So you said right before you drugged me."

"You misunderstand," Nyssa says, shaking her head and reaching for Sara's hand with hesitant fingers. "Love is my weakness. You are my weakness. And yet, I find I cannot… will not give that up for any strength."

Sara lets Nyssa take her hand, something that seems to come as much relief to Nyssa, but she's still wary. Listening, yes, but wary. It's a private conversation, obviously so, and though neither of the women pay Lyla any mind, she takes the opportunity to leave the room unnoticed.

"I had not been at ease with my mission, regardless of my father's will, even prior to our last meeting. You must know this," Nyssa starts.

"And yet you were willing then to betray me," Sara points out harshly.

"Nyssa…" Sara protests.

"You know my father, Sara," Nyssa points out. "What do you think he would do if I abandoned him and pledged my loyalty to you as I have long wished to do?"

Sara doesn't have to say it. She knows. She's always known. Ra's Al Ghul has never been happy with their relationship, but he has tolerated it because Nyssa, at least, has stayed loyal and it has given him leverage to ensure that continued loyalty.

"He would threaten my life," Sara acknowledges.

"And I would pay any price to prevent that," Nyssa says, eyes intense and fixed on Sara's. "Any price, be it kidnapping a child or slaying my father's enemies, I care not so long as you are safe, beloved."

"I don't want that!" Sara snaps. "My life is not worth sacrificing Ollie's son's for and it's not worth sacrificing your soul for either."

"I know," Nyssa placates soothingly. "I know you would not trade such things. It is one of the many reasons that I love you so. But I find I am selfish with you. I cannot bear the thought of enduring this world without you."

Sara doesn't point out that there are more ways of losing her than through death. She loves Nyssa. Wholly. Desperately. They have, at times, saved each other. Their lives. Their hearts. Their souls. There is no one in the world who understands her better, knows more fully all of things she has been through. There is no one who has ever made her pulse race and heart surge. Not like Nyssa does. And yet… and yet if Nyssa were to torture an innocent child, if she were to kidnap Ollie's son for crimes committed by his bastard half-aunt's biological father… Sara's not so sure she could reconcile that. There are some things you can't come back from.

That does no good to mention though. Not now. Not when Nyssa has already chosen another path.

"So what changed?" Sara asks, clasping Nyssa's other hand and letting her thumb drift over her lover's calloused fingers. "You had Connor. You could have fulfilled your father's commands. Why didn't you?"

"For the same reason I sought to do so in the first place," Nyssa says with an embittered laugh,
"Nyssa… I still don't understand," Sara tells her, drawing the other woman's gaze back to her.

"I learned that Al Mobaath has been declared my father's heir," Nyssa explains, watching as the confusion settles on Sara's face. "I am usurped, my place in the League is forfeit. There is but one way I can be of use to my father now."

Sara freezes at this, her fingers stilling and eyes widening in horror as Nyssa's hand lets go of hers and drifts up to tuck a lock of blond hair behind her ear with gentle affection.

"They would kill you to break me, my love," Nyssa tells her mournfully. "And then the League would make me their broodmare, force me to wed the new heir to lend him the illusion of legitimacy and bear him heirs of his own. I cannot. I will not allow you to fall. I will not be made to belong to any man. I am yours, Ta-er al-Sahfer, as I have ever been."

"I'm not sure I'm Ta-er al-Sahfer anymore," Sara tells her. "Not if we're enemies of the League."

"Canary, then. Or Sara. Just Sara. Your name matters not at all to me," Nyssa says plainly. "You know this."

"I do," Sara confirms.

"Can you forgive me the choices I made? The sins I have committed against you and your friends?" Nyssa asks, looking ever-so-nervous.

"In spite of everything, you saved Ollie's son," Sara says after a moment. "And you are finally choosing me, choosing us over the life your father planned out for you. There's nothing to forgive. I understand why you did what you did. I don't know how far I would go to protect you, if our positions were reversed. I'm not exactly fit to sit in judgement, Nyssa."

"And yet yours is the only judgement I concern myself with," Nyssa tells her with clear delight.

The joy that spreads across Nyssa's face is undiluted and edged in hope. And, even with all their time together, it is a foreign look on her for Sara. Nyssa has never once been free of the League. Not in her whole life. She has never had the freedom to pursue her own path. But here, now, she's taking the first steps towards what she wants. It's maybe the most beautiful she has ever seemed to Sara.

"It may not be a terribly long life ahead of us," Nyssa acknowledges. "The League will pursue us to our graves unless we defeat my father and his heir first. Our odds are… not favorable."

"Maybe not," Sara agrees. "But it's not just us. We have allies and a common enemy. Your father is powerful. Definitely. We can't underestimate him. But I don't really think our chances are as bad as you seem to think."

"I can scarcely stand to dream it," Nyssa laughs, a light, strange sound on her lips. "I hope that you are right, beloved. But even if you are not, I find I should rather live our life together for a short while than an eternity as a prize of the League, without you."

"An assassin with a poetic heart," Sara grins, shaking her head as she touches her hand to Nyssa's cheek. "If only your enemies knew."

"No one shall ever know me as you do," Nyssa promises, leaning her cheek into Sara's hand.

The future in front of them is uncertain, so uncertain, for the first time ever. Without the League, they
can be anyone, go anywhere, and neither of them has ever fully imagined what a life without the League might mean.

If they win… if they can leave Nanda Parbat and all it entails behind, start a new life… what then? Can they truly settle into a life of simple pleasures? The two of them in a cottage somewhere or travelling around the world without a target? Or would they stay in Starling, help Oliver and his team to protect the city? Sara doesn't know. She doesn't even know what Nyssa would want, but she suddenly finds that's a conversation that she'd very much like to have.

But… but there are other considerations first.

"We need to save my sister," Sara tells Nyssa.

"I know," Nyssa acknowledges with a sigh. "But I fear that Tommy is lost to you and Oliver will not accept that."

"Neither will I," Sara says blatantly. "He was my friend once too, you know. My sister loved him. Ollie loved him. He's Thea's brother. I owe it to him to try to save him too."

"Sara..." Nyssa says hesitantly, her voice catching a little at the end.

"If he not there at all, if he's just Al Mobaath now… then why did he take Laurel?" Sara asks.

The heavy silence that floods the room is answer enough, but Nyssa replies anyhow.

"I don't know," she says.

"Don't you think that means something?" Sara demands. "Don't you think it's possible that he's still in there somewhere?"

"I think I have seen the effects of my father's methods before," Nyssa says. "And I believe it a mistake to believe him stronger than any of the others have been."

It's not an answer Sara is prepared to accept.

"Saving Laurel means saving Tommy, too," Sara tells her. "Just like saving me would mean saving you."

"And I am the one with a poetic heart, you say?" Nyssa asks, a smile curling at the edges of her lips.

"I'm going to save them. And I'd like your help. Are you with me?" Sara asks.

"My love, if there is but one thing that I am, it is that I am with you."

"Where are we?"

"Somewhere safe," Oliver responds in what has to be one of his worst explanations ever.

"That's sort of like me asking what you're going to the grocery store for and you responding 'food.'
You know that right?” Felicity asks, raising her eyebrows pointedly.

That this is something Oliver actually once did only serves to underscore her point, in her opinion. He seems fully unimpressed, though. And uneasy. He seems unimpressed and uneasy, which is a combination that never sits well with Felicity.

"This is… a contingency plan," he offers, giving up as little as possible.

"Is this… Oliver is this a backup lair?" Felicity hisses, grabbing onto his arm and looking back at Sandra and Connor a few paces behind them.

"It's… uh… maybe," Oliver admits.

"Why didn't you tell me!" Felicity demands. "I mean… hello we're a team, right? This feels like a thing I should know. Why isn't this a thing I knew?"

Oliver pauses in his step, huffing a little in frustration.

"There's... Felicity, I didn't want to talk about any of the reasons we might need it," he confesses after a moment.

She pauses at that, bites her lip and pulls back a little, staring at him like she's considering his words in a new light. Maybe she is.

"Our relationship is very public and we both know that means you're in danger of being a target. If something happened to you, if you were taken or… or something… I wanted somewhere that I knew you didn't know to be a new base of operations while we tried to get you back," Oliver says, fidgeting in an uncharacteristic manner as he speaks.

"You wanted somewhere I couldn't give up under torture?" Felicity asks, reading between the lines.

Oliver winces at that. Visibly. The very idea of it has him on edge, but he's also been through entirely too much to discount the possibility and, it appears, he's more prepared for it than anyone might have anticipated.

"Digg doesn't know about it either," Oliver replies instead of answering.

Felicity isn't sure how to respond to that. It's meant to be comforting, surely, but in actuality… well, she's just not sure how to take it.

"This is so cool!" Connor's voice rings out from behind them. "What is all this stuff?"

"Connor, don't touch anything," Sandra tells him somewhat nervously as the boy reaches for an arrow on a work bench.

"Especially not that," Oliver says sternly, crossing over the grab the arrow from his son's hands.

It's an explosive arrow. Felicity can tell that on sight, but Connor, of course, would have no idea. And he looks more than a little hurt at his dad's chastisement.

"Not everything around here is safe, Connor," Felicity tells him gently. "Your dad is just looking out for you."

"I don't want you getting hurt," Oliver tells his son, resting a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Okay," Connor agrees with a small measure of hesitation.
"You're all going to say here," Oliver tells them. "Felicity, we've got computers set up and the rest of you... just... just stay here."

"Is that safe?" Sandra asks with wariness. "Why is this man even after my son? Is it... is it because his connection to you? Who you are?"

"It's because of his connection to me," Thea corrects from a few steps behind Connor.

"None of this is your fault, Thea," Oliver reminds her.

"I know that," Thea responds. "I do. But if I weren't his aunt then he wouldn't be in danger right now."

"I've never had an aunt," Connor says.

"I've never been an aunt," Thea tells him. "And let me tell you, buddy, the minute this is all over I'm going to be the best aunt ever. I promise. There will be candy and presents and shopping trips and I will spoil you every bit as much trouble as my brother spoiled me when I was your age."

"Thea..." Oliver groans, though Felicity suspects that he secretly objects to this idea far less than he pretends to.

"Turn about is fair play, Ollie," Thea smirks impishly.

"You helped save my life today," Connor points out to Thea. "I'm not saying no to candy or presents, 'cause those sound pretty awesome, but you pretty much are already the best aunt ever."

"Come here, kiddo," Thea says, pulling the boy into a hug as she looks over his head to her brother. "Your kid is pretty awesome, Ollie."

The little smile of quiet pride on Oliver's face is a beautiful thing, sends a jolt of happiness and want through Felicity's being in a way she wouldn't have expected. She wants this for him, wants it more than she could have thought possible. Not terribly long ago, she hadn't even been sure that she would ever want kids. But these days... She wants to see that look on Oliver's face. She is grateful that Connor can inspire that in him. And, she thinks, one day she might very much like to see him look at their child like that.

'Might' is the wrong word. She does. She does want this for them. Someday. Very, very much.

"He is," Oliver agrees and Felicity watches as a blindingly happy smile spreads across Connor's partially hidden face.

"I still don't understand," Sandra chimes in after clearing her throat, looking every bit as affected by Oliver and Thea's acceptance of Connor in their lives as Felicity is. "Why is this League of Assassins after Thea at all?"

"That's a long story," Felicity sighs.

"My father is Malcolm Merlyn," Thea says, keeping her arm draped around Connor as he ends the hug. "The League is trying to get to me to get to him."

"Huh... Less of a long story than I thought, apparently," Felicity muses.

"Malcolm Merlyn?" Sandra asks blinking at the other girl. "But that's..."

"Sucky? Yeah," Thea shrugs. "But he betrayed the League and they want to make him suffer for it.
They want to destroy his bloodline in front of him before they kill him because nobody does revenge quite like the League does. They tried to get to Connor because they knew as soon as I found out about him being my nephew it would draw me out into the open which would force my father's hand."

"That's… ridiculous," Sandra decides aloud. "How did they even know you'd find out he was your nephew?"

"Because Malcolm made sure of it," Oliver replies gruffly.

"What?"

"He's manipulated this entire thing," Oliver tells her. "I don't know for sure how he found out about Connor. I'm guessing he had someone keeping an eye on Pamela because he knows full well that she's kept a lot of my family's secrets over the years. When she decided to tell me about Connor… he found out and told the League."

"But why would he do that? If he knew they would use him to get to Thea to get to him, what's the point?" Sandra asks.

"To force Oliver's hand," Felicity chimes in.

Everyone looks to her and she feels the scrutiny keenly. She's right, though, and she knows it. So, she presses on.

"Malcolm wants this over. Oliver has been trying to find a way to stop the League for months, but the risk has always been too high," Felicity points out. "We can't get the help we need to go after the League directly. But if the League took his son…"

"It would be worth the risk," Oliver finishes. "Malcolm wants me to defeat Ra's al Ghul so that he'll be safe and the League will have a power void that he can fill himself."

"But he didn't count on Nyssa turning against the League," Felicity points out.

"That messed with his plans in more than one way," Oliver agrees. "Not only does the League not have Connor but once Ra's is defeated, Nyssa can easily step into his spot as the next Ra's."

"Ideally," Felicity agrees.

"There's no way my father doesn't have a backup plan," Thea points out uneasily. "His backup plans probably have backup plans."

"Thankfully, it's hard to execute plans when you're chained to a toilet," Felicity notes. "I mean, I would think it would be, anyhow. I've never tried. But I feel like that might prove difficult."

"He mentioned allies," Thea points out.

"Really? Who would ally themselves with Malcolm Merlyn?" Felicity asks with distaste.

"Well… there was a while there where we did," Thea reminds her. "We sort of are now by keeping him alive."

"Not willingly," Felicity responds with a scrunched up nose.

"We don't know how willing these supposed allies of his are, either," Oliver points out. "If they exist at all. But Malcolm is a master at manipulating people. We should all be wary."
"This is too much," Sandra says, rubbing her furrowed brow with her hand.

This might be a somewhat natural progression of the craziness that is their lives to Felicity and Oliver and Thea, but it's got to be jarring to Sandra and Connor. Their lives aren't like this. It has to be difficult on both of them.

"You'll get used to it," Felicity advises.

"I sincerely hope not," Sandra replies.

That's fair. When she thinks about, Felicity sort of hopes they don't have to get used to it, either. Threats from the League shouldn't have to be a part of their lives.

"I'm going to end this," Oliver promises.

Sandra barely hesitates before nodding back. There's some measure of trust between them already. Felicity cannot imagine that it would be there had Oliver not had to fight to protect their son, had he not thrown his body over the boy's to keep him safe. But he did. And Sandra had been there to see it. And, at least as far as his capability and devotion to protecting Connor goes, Sandra believes in him. That's huge. For all of them. And Felicity is tremendously grateful that the other woman is proving to be reasonable given the extreme nature of their circumstances.

"You're going to fight the leader of the ninjas?" Connor asks, looking more than a little concerned.

"I'm going to do whatever I have to do to keep everyone in this room safe," Oliver tells him. "That probably is going to mean fighting their leader… yes."

"I don't want you to get hurt, dad," Connor says, his little face serious and his voice slightly anxious. "You fought off Al Mobaath and that was great. You're awesome even if you aren't a ninja. But… I'm… I mean it's a little scary."

"It is," Oliver agrees.

"You don't look scared," Connor notes.

"Well, I am," Oliver counters. "I just don't let that fear take over. Being scared isn't a bad thing, Con. It just means you have a chance to be brave."

Connor nods, thinking deeply about that before resolve stiffens his features.

"If you can be brave, I can, too," Connor says firmly.

The little smile on Oliver's face at his son's word is apparently contagious because Felicity feels it spreading across her own and Thea's bearing a full-on grin as she squeezes her arm around her nephew.

"So your Bratva contacts… they're coming here?" Felicity asks, looking around the room and biting her lip.

It sort of screams that he's the Arrow. In that there are actual arrows on the workbench, a bank of admittedly high-end computers that Felicity will tinker with the moment Oliver leaves, a wall of weapons in the back and a training area - complete with salmon ladder - next to it. The only thing missing is his telltale hood. Connor might not have put the pieces together, probably because he's a kid from Central City instead of Starling, but the Bratva will know instantly.
"You don't think that's a risk?" Felicity questions.

"It is," Oliver agrees. "But it's a calculated one and we don't have a better option."

"Are we sure we need them?" Felicity asks somewhat hopefully.

"I'm not willing to rely on a lock and a secret location for safety. Are you?"

"...No, Russian mob is good. Bring on the borscht and Matryoshka dolls."

"You do know they're unlikely to have either of those, right?" Oliver asks, an eyebrow quirked in amusement.

"I've never much liked borscht anyhow," Felicity shrugs.

Oliver opens his mouth to say something, but whatever his response was going to be is cut off by the heavy knock on the lair's door. Reality seeps in then, the mood turning tense on a dime, and right in front of Felicity's eyes, Oliver slips into the persona of Bratva captain. She can see it happen, him slipping into the role as surely as he slips into his leather gear.

Armor comes in a lot of different forms. So do masks. Oliver wears more of both than most.

He pulls open the door to reveal a tall, bald man with bad teeth, a broad smile, and three non-descript, burly men looming behind him. All four of them are large enough that they actually make Oliver seem short. They would be more than a little intimidating even without the very large guns all of them are carrying.

"Oliver," the man greets, his voice deep and heavily accented. "It has been too many years, no? I thought, perhaps, you had forgotten your friends."

His tone isn't quite as friendly as his words and Felicity has to wonder how, exactly, this man knows Oliver.

"Sergei," Oliver says, voice blank and strangely unemotional. "We were never friends."

Whatever angle Oliver is playing, it's really making Felicity fairly antsy. Pissing off Russian mobsters who are supposed to be protecting her is… an odd choice. Definitely.

"Not friends, no," Sergei agrees. "Brothers, maybe? But the Brotherhood has not seen your face since you returned to your rich American roots. This is not a way to treat family, I think."

"I don't answer to you," Oliver points out, gripping the larger man by the back of his neck and leaning in slightly, his voice lowered. "I am a Captain. You are a Boyevik. Know your place."

His tone is authoritative, commanding in a way that Felicity has very rarely heard. It leaves no doubt whatsoever who is in charge here and the Bratva men acquiesce easily.

"Of course, капитан," Sergei replies with a deferential dip of his head.

"How is your wife? Your son, Sergei?" Oliver asks. "He's got to be… what nine now?"

It sounds conversational, but it's not. Felicity knows that immediately and her eyes widen in surprise at the implied threat. It's not like Oliver. It's surely not something he'd follow through with, but the Bratva has rules all their own, a power structure she's never taken the time to understand, and Oliver knows well how to navigate it by now.
"Ten," Sergei says, eyebrows knit, looking very surprised that Oliver has ventured into this territory.

"The same as my son, then," Oliver says, nodding his head subtly toward Connor. "You'll understand my need to keep him safe, to protect my family when they're under attack."

"Да," Sergei nods. "We understand each other perfectly, капитан."

"Glad to hear it," Oliver confirms. "You will not fail me on this, Sergei. When this is over, I'll speak to the Pakhan on your behalf and I'll consider us even for Kiev."

Sergei startles visibly at this, stands a little straighter and nods, looking like he can't believe his luck. Felicity decides very, very quickly that she probably doesn't ever want to know what happened in Kiev.

"I would be grateful for that," Sergei says sincerely. "And we are honored at the opportunity to serve our капитан, of course."

"Of course," Oliver echoes before turning and walking back to face Felicity.

"Your friends seem charming," she says under her breath.

"They'll follow my commands," Oliver tells her rather than debate it. "And you'll be on the comms, right?"

"Of course," she agrees immediately.

"Don't turn them off," Oliver tells her seriously. "I need to know everyone here is safe. If Tommy finds this place..."

"Don't worry about us. We'll be fine. Safe as houses," Felicity tells him, her face scrunching up slightly as she thinks about the phrase. "Or, actually, safer than our house, anyhow. Which is sort of the point of being here when you think about it. But not actually my point."

"You have one?" Oliver asks, looking amused in spite of himself.

"I do," she confirms. "We're safe. We'll be fine. You need to focus on Tommy and Laurel right now. You need to bring them both home."

He kisses her at that, completely uncaring that they have a rather sizable audience that includes both his son and his sister. He lingers. He always does. Oliver doesn't do things by half. His hands are on her face as his lips press against hers before he pulls back scarcely an inch and rests his forehead against hers.

"Take care of them," he tells her quietly.

She nods her head almost imperceptibly. His request isn't about keeping them safe. Not really. It's about being there as his proxy, as his partner, for his son and his sister. And that's... she'll do that. She'll always do that. He doesn't even have to ask.

"I still want to go with you."

It's Thea's voice that pulls them out of their own little world, population two. Oliver steps back, his hand sliding down Felicity's arm to cup her elbow, like he can't quite get himself to break their connection yet, but his focus is otherwise wholly on his sister.

"You can't," he reminds her.
"I know. I get it," she admits reluctantly. "Just… bring him back. I need both of my brothers."

Oliver must not trust his voice because he nods at his sister instead of replying. He steps away from Felicity and Thea over to Connor and hugs the boy, dropping a kiss on the crown of his head.

"Listen to your mom and Felicity, okay?" he asks Connor. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Connor gulps and nods, but says nothing as Oliver lets him go and moves towards the wall of weapons, grabbing a bow and quiver full of arrows.

"Dad!" Connor shouts as Oliver heads toward the door, his weapons in hand.

Oliver turns back to look at his son, who has stepped a few paces forward before halting in his tracks. He doesn't know what he wants to say, though. Felicity can see that even from a few paces away. He just wanted his father to stop, keep him there longer, if only for a moment.

"Be brave?" Connor requests finally, his voice quiet and uncertain and so young.

Even with the Bratva men crowding the lair, Oliver can't help the small smile that his son's concern brings to his face. He nods, eyes fixed on Connor.

"You too," he tells the boy before heading out the door and into the streets of Starling City.

Laurel's voice echoes in the darkness. She's not blindfolded anymore, but Tommy… Al Mobaath, whoever he is… didn't deign to leave a light on and night has fallen, bathing the room in pitch black. She calls out. For him. For Sara. For her father. For Oliver. For anyone at all, really. But her cries echo off of concrete walls with no response.

She can't loosen the binds on her hands and feet. There's no slack to speak of and no sharp edges to move towards. She doesn't know why she's here, why the League wants her here, but that they do is terrifying enough.

For what feels like forever, it's just her.

And that's terrifying on its own.

But it's nothing compared to when, quite suddenly, it's not just her.

There's movement in the shadows. She sees it out of the corner of her eye and, at first, thinks it a trick of her mind. Then, momentarily, she hopes against hope that it's someone come to rescue her.

It's not.

The shadows multiply, edge along the room in the darkness. There are so many, too many, and she can't see faces but everything in her screams to run, escape, terror boils in her veins. But she can't even stand, much less run.

The rope she's tied with digs painfully into her wrists and ankles as she struggles out of desperation. Either sweat or blood or both leave a wet trail over her fingers. It hurts, but something instinctive in
her keeps tugging against the ropes anyhow, even though she knows it's futile.

No one's saying anything. No one is doing anything. And she has never been more terrified in her entire life.

The moonlight streaming through the window offers the barest glimpse of the room and as the shadows shift, a sliver of light catches them. The League. A dozen of them, masked and stoic. Unfeeling, unseeing, uncaring that she's there. They're just... standing.

Again, Laurel screams. But like before, there's no response but silence.
"If you think I shall remain bedridden as if I am weak and infirm whilst the rest of you wage war against my father's men, you are most sorely mistaken."

"We don't need someone who's injured in the field," Digg's voice counters solidly. "An obvious weak spot is an easy thing to exploit."

Oliver winces internally as he steps through the ruins of the doorway to his home. Digg isn't wrong, but Nyssa isn't exactly the sort to back down easily. Or at all, really. And Oliver's certain that his friend's words have done nothing but incite the assassin further.

"That's not fair, John," Sara's voice kicks in defensively.

"Neither is relying on someone who just woke up after injections of Midazolam and Fentanyl less than an hour ago," Lyla points out. "Did you need to see the list of possible side effects again? Because none of them mix well with combat."

"Hence why, had I been afforded the opportunity, I would have declined your medication," Nyssa snaps.

Oliver clears his throat from somewhere near the wreckage of his coffee table and everyone turns toward him immediately, their hands on their weapons. That none of them were alert enough to hear him coming would be a fairly huge concern if they didn't have more pressing issues to deal with at the moment. But they do. They definitely do.

"Oh thank god," Roy mumbles from a few steps behind Digg. "I don't think I've ever been more happy to see you in my life."

"I saved you from being killed on live television," Oliver points out, blinking at the younger man. "Twice."

Roy nods his head to the side and thinks about that for a second before shrugging.

"Well, okay, but this is a close second," he decides after a moment.

Oliver blinks at him for a moment before dismissing him in favor of the two couples squared off in front of him.

"How are you feeling?" he asks Nyssa, because that seems the wisest place to start.


"You knocked him out?" Oliver asks, turning to Lyla.

"And put him in the guest room. He has enough barbiturates in his system to keep a horse down for the next six hours or so and I left extra doses of Phenobarbitone in the bathroom," Lyla confirms. "If we're protecting Malcolm Merlyn, I'm far more comfortable doing that with him incapacitated. Plus, I found it somewhat satisfying to stab a needle in his arm."

Digg grunts in agreement from her side, nodding at his wife.

"If he is awake, he is planning something," Nyssa says in support. "I, for one, much prefer an Al Saher who has no chance to plot his escape and revenge. He is called The Magician for a reason."
Oliver can't really argue with that reasoning. They have a point. And it's not as though they'll be able to keep a constant eye on him. Even leaving him here is a danger. If Al Mobaath circles back and finds Malcolm unconscious… Well, he doesn't know how that would end. Would the League be satisfied with just killing Malcolm before moving on to slaughter the city? Would they still want to destroy him by torturing Thea in front of him first? Any way you look at it, it escalates their timetable to an unmanageable degree and it, unbelievably, put all of them in even more immediate danger.

Still, there's something unsettling about knowing the only thing that stand between Malcolm Merlyn and escape is a syringe full of drugs.

"All right…" Oliver says warily, wondering if Anatoly has any more men he can call on to guard the remnants of the apartment. "Nyssa, I want you with Connor and the others."

The assassin bristles at this, stands a little straighter, looks a little more on edge, and Oliver knows she's taking this as judgement.

It isn't.

"My father's men-" Nyssa starts combatively.

"Connor trusts you," Oliver interrupts. "You kept him safe. You did. Thea's a surprisingly good shot and I have men guarding them, but I would still feel better knowing you were there for him. And I know he'd feel better, too."

Nyssa eyes him like she's looking for a lie, but she'll find none.

"You wish for me to protect your son?" she asks warily.

"I am trusting in your ability and commitment to protect my son," Oliver tells her squarely. "Lyla's not wrong about the medicine she gave you. You shouldn't be out running around yet. But there are more fronts this battle is taking place on than just the one with Al Mobaath. Connor, Felicity, Thea… they need protection. That's why I brought in the Bratva, I know, but no one knows the League like you do. And you've already proven to me that you'll risk your life for Connor's. You've already proven it to him, too. So… yes. I want you to protect my son. If you're willing."

It's somewhat like the room is collectively holding its breath. Even the wind through the shattered window has stilled for the moment, pending Nyssa's response.

"I accept the honor of safeguarding your son," Nyssa decides after a moment, with a slight bow of her head.

"Thank you," he replies before looking to the rest of the group. "And Lyla, thank you for your assistance."

"That sounds like a dismissal," Digg bristles.

"It's not like that, Johnny," Lyla says, placating her husband.

"I'd be thrilled to have Lyla's help getting Tommy and Laurel back," Oliver tells his friend. "But there's no way Waller's going to condone that. Is there, Lyla?"

"No," she agrees. "There is not."

It surprises Oliver, often, precisely how much he and Lyla are alike. He knows how he came to be who he is, what hells he travelled through to make him the man he is today. He can't help but
wonder what exactly happened to Lyla to bring her to such a similar place in her life.

"Is there going to be trouble for the part you've had is this so far?" Oliver asks her.

"I'll handle Waller," Lyla tells him. "You have enough to worry about."

Which means yes.

He wants to offer to help smooth things over for her, but he's well aware of what a futile effort that would be. His relationship with ARGUS is complicated and he doesn't exactly have any favors to call in with Waller. Not without promising things he's unwilling to offer, anyhow.

"Keep me updated," Lyla tells them. "Waller will want ARGUS to stay out of it at this point, but…"

Oliver nods. She doesn't have to finish that train of thought. If the League threatens the city, really threatens the city, then ARGUS might intervene. That could be a very good thing or it could be a very bad thing. They all remember ARGUS' response to Slade's mirakuru soldiers well enough to know that.

"Definitely," Oliver agrees. "If there's anything we should know about what Waller is doing…"

"Johnny will be my first call," Lyla nods. "When he doesn't answer his damned phone, you're my second."

"My battery died!" Digg protests.

"Uh huh," Lyla replies, unimpressed. "Watch each other's six. I'll cover Waller."

Digg doesn't kiss Lyla goodbye. They're not that kind of couple. But he squeezes her hand briefly and they exchange a weighty look before she strides out of the room, Digg's eyes fixed on her retreating form as she goes.

"Nyssa, if I tell you where the others are, can you memorize it without writing it down?" Oliver asks the assassin.

"Of course," Nyssa says, looking at him as though this is a truly ridiculous question.

"Good," he replies. "I'll give it to you and let Felicity know you're coming so she can warn the guards."

"And the rest of us?" Roy asks, hands buried in the pockets of his hoodie.

"The rest of us are going to suit up," Oliver replies. "And then we're going to get Tommy and Laurel back. We need to end this. Now."

The already dim light leeches out of the room as hours wear on. Laurel doesn't know how long she's been here, tied to this chair, her wrists throbbing and raw. She doesn't have a watch and she wouldn't be able to see it even if she did. But, ultimately, she's not sure how much it matters.
She should be hungry by now - she knows this logically - but she's not. Her body is fueled exclusively by terror and adrenaline at this point. That will crash soon, probably. She'll be bone-tired and nauseous. Her body will betray her, shaking and sweating and it will feel a little too much like withdrawal for her liking. But she can handle that. She's been there before and she's strong enough, experienced enough, to know that sometimes all you have to do to move through something is take your next breath.

So that's what she's doing now. Breathing. Focusing on the steady inhale and exhale whispering through her lips. She controls that. Not Al Mobaath or the League. Her. It's the basest of forms of control, but it's all she has to cling to at this point.

The door to the room, the only one she's seen, slams open suddenly mid-inhale. The echo of steel against concrete thunders through the room, but Laurel's the only one who jumps. The League, the dozen men in black standing stoically like the Terracotta Army, don't even flinch.

How they knew it was Al Mobaath and not someone coming to her rescue, Laurel has no idea. But they did.

"Out," Al Mobaath orders the small army in front of him as he flips a switch and blinds Laurel by suddenly bathing the room in harsh fluorescent light. "Patrol the perimeter. We'll have company soon."

Laurel squints through narrowed eyelids, not adjusted to the room's brightness. He's standing a few paces in front of her without his mask, staring at her as the League members file out of the room behind him.

His face hurts her. It would no matter what look was on it at this point. But this… this blank look of disinterest. It could break her if she's not careful.

Luckily for Laurel, she's very, very careful these days.

"That will hurt for quite some time. It was foolish to fight your bindings," Al Mobaath tells her, eyes fixed on her wrists.

"If you thought I wasn't going to fight, you remember even less of Tommy's life than you claim to," Laurel challenges.

He looks vaguely displeased at this, which she takes as a little bit of a triumph, and his gaze shifts to her face, flickering briefly toward her lips. He still doesn't know why he kissed her, she realizes. He's still on uneven footing with her. That's a triumph, too.

"Once upon a time, you said the fire… the fight inside me was one of your favorite things about me," she reminds him.

"Once upon a time, maybe," he allows. "But this isn't a fairy tale."

"Maybe one of the Brothers Grimm ones," she counters.

"Maybe," he agrees. "This doesn't end in 'happily ever after.' But then, I think you already knew that."

"I've known that a long time," she agrees. "Since CNRI crumbled around us and I was the only one who got out. Maybe even before that."

There's something less harsh in his gaze at that, a sense of shared understanding that somehow
transcends their current situation. The world has not been kind to either of them. Life has remade
them both into something worn and rough. But they have endured.

"You should eat something," he tells her suddenly, pulling a protein bar from the pocket of his robe.

It's the same brand she keeps in her desk drawer at work for late nights when she's too wrapped up in
a case and forgets to eat. Tommy always hated that, told her it wasn't 'real food' and even badass
champions of the common man needed actual meals. Seeing the stupid protein bar in his hand now
slices through her in a way she wouldn't have expected. It's just more evidence that while he's
Tommy, he's not really Tommy.

"I'm not hungry," she tells him, which is received with a scowl.

"Fine. Have it your way," he says, tossing the bar onto a nearby metal table.

"You're not going to fight me on this?" she asks surprised.

"Why should I?" he counters blandly.

Her face falls a little at that. She knows it does. Tommy would have fought with her, cajoled her,
been charming and teasing until she'd caved.

"I'm not Tommy," he hisses at her, apparently reading her face as well as Tommy ever did.

"So you keep telling me," she replies sharply.

Her response incites something in him and he slams his hands onto the metal table with enough force
that the sound jolts her. He turns toward her, eyes burning with something, which simultaneously
terrifies and thrills her. Because it's feeling. It's expression. It's proof she gets through to him
on some level, even if she's inciting something dangerous in a very violent man.

He stalks towards her, sending her pulse thudding wildly as her breath catches in her throat. When he
stops, they're toe-to-toe. He leans over her so his mouth is right next to her ear, his hands resting on
the edges of the chair next to her thighs. And, God, he smells like Tommy, familiar and comforting
even as his breath ghosts harshly across her ear.

"Tommy couldn't have survived what I've been through. He wasn't strong enough. Not for you, not
for rebirth, not for the League. I am remolded from the broken shards of his life," he hisses into her
ear. "He is dead as surely as if he were buried in the empty grave that bears his name."

She turns her head to look at him, scarcely a few inches away from her face. He doesn't back up,
doesn't back down, but there's only one part of what he's said that holds Laurel's interest. They've
already gone rounds with the rest.

"What do you mean he wasn't strong enough for me?" Laurel asks, brow knit.

"You broke him well before Ra's al Ghul ever did," Al Mobaath responds.

That stings. Badly. Tears well up in her eyes against her will and a lump forms in her throat that's
hard to speak around, but she has to, has to, because this can't go unrefuted. Not when it's Tommy's
lips saying these things.

"I loved Tommy," she challenges. "Things were bad toward the end, yes, but I loved him. He knew
that. I know he knew that."
It's hard to tell which one of them she's trying to convince. Both of them, maybe. She needs to believe that Tommy died knowing she loved him. The idea that he didn't is unthinkable to her.

"What Tommy knew, Laurel, is that you're an addict. Well before the drugs and the booze… Oliver Queen was your very first addiction. Something you craved in spite of knowing the way it would hurt you. You're toxic together but you will always crave another hit. That's what Tommy knew."

There's a broken noise that Laurel realizes belatedly came from her, because that's possibly the harshest thing that he could have said and it hurts in a way she hadn't realized she could hurt.

"That's not true," she counters, as angry at him as she is of the way her body has betrayed her by producing too many tears for her eyes to hold. "You don't get to talk to me about addiction like you understand it. You don't get to talk to me about Ollie or what I went through after Tommy died. Not unless you're Tommy. I loved him. I still love him. We would have worked past everything, if he hadn't died. We would have gotten through it."

"You think so?" he asks, quirking his head to the side in a way that's both taunting and echoes painfully of Tommy's teasing nature. "You think he could have forgiven you?"

"I don't think I need forgiveness," she challenges. "I think we'd broken up. I'm sorry that he saw what happened between me and Ollie, but I'm not sorry that it happened. Because that wasn't me falling off the wagon, that was closure. That was me finally realizing that he and I don't work together anymore. Maybe we never did. Maybe you're right. Maybe it was always toxic. So, you know what? I don't need forgiveness and I don't owe anyone an explanation."

"I'm not sure he'd agree," Al Mobaath says after a moment, his eyes tracing the path of tears on her cheeks.

"I am," she nods fiercely. "I am."

"Cling to that certainty, if you need to," he says, undoubtedly shooting for an unaffected tone, but not quite reaching it as he puts a little space between them. "I don't share it."

"I'm certain enough for both of us," she announces defiantly.

He scowls again, but he can't hide the flash of something in his eyes as he looks at her. It's familiar and right and for half a second he looks like Tommy. Really looks like him.

He says nothing before stalking out of the room, hitting the lights again as he goes, leaving her alone in the dark. It's less unsettling this time, though. Oliver and the others are coming for her. She knows it. And Tommy… Tommy is out there too. Buried. Hidden. Smothered by this new persona, but he's there. She feels it, knows it as surely as she's ever known anything in her life.

Tears might stain her cheeks and her wrists might be caked with her own dried blood, but she smiles and laughs and looks toward the ceiling anyhow. Despite being tied to a chair in an empty warehouse guarded by assassins, there's more hope inside her than she's had since the night CNRI crumbled around her.

No matter what her situation right now, her spirit is bolstered by that.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Okay, this is slightly later than I'd expected to post it (sorry) and short than I'd said it would be on Tumblr. That's because I cut the chapter at a different place than expected. Good news is I'm more than 2k into the next chapter, so I should be right on schedule to post it this weekend. Until then... enjoy!

The Bratva enforcers that Oliver had called in somehow manage to project an air of disinterest balanced with battle-ready preparedness. Felicity has no doubt that they're primed for a fight should the lair come under attack, but they're seemingly ignoring everything their charges are doing as well as everything in the room.

It's an illusion. She's sure of it.

Information is currency in their business and, despite being a ranking member of their organization, Oliver's always been something of a wild card. They're on his turf, probably for the first time ever. There's no way they aren't paying exceedingly close attention to everything there, no matter what appearances they're giving.

She'll take stock later, try to see things through their eyes, figure out if this place really screams Oliver-Queen-is-The-Arrow or if it could be passed off as a stronghold for a Bratva Captain with the need to operate discretely. She's not holding her breath that they're lucky enough for the latter, but she would be crossing her fingers if they weren't wholly necessary for using the computer at the moment.

Crossing her canary-yellow polished toes will have to suffice.

"You're handling this well."

"Not my first rodeo," Felicity responds automatically as she types away at the keyboard, only looking up toward Sandra after her own words really register. "Or, actually… I've never been to a rodeo, so that's a bad example. But it's not like this is a rodeo anyhow. It's a rescue mission. To save a brainwashed assassin who's actually our friend. Sadly, this is definitely not my first one of those, either."

Maybe that's not the most reassuring thing to say. Is experience in dealing with brainwashed assassins a good thing or a bad thing right now? Probably a bit of both. Sandra's kept a surprisingly cool head so far, but this is all way outside her sphere of normal.

"You're handling it pretty well, too, you know," Felicity offers up. "It's impressive, actually."

"I'm not handling it at all," Sandra counters with a sharp laugh and a glance darted back to where Thea and Connor are playing cards. "I'm… I'm treading water right now because that's the only option. I wasn't even ready for Oliver to find out about Connor much less for any of the rest of this."

"If it helps any, no one is ever really ready for resurrected super-assassins. Even if it's something they've dealt with before," Felicity confides.
"How do you do this?" Sandra asks in a hushed voice, sinking down into the chair next to Felicity. "Why do you do this? Why does he do this? How did any of this even happen?"

Felicity turns toward her, computers ignored for the moment. The searches will keep going without her active involvement and this… this needs her attention right now.

"Why he does what he does is his story to tell, Sandra. Not mine," Felicity tells the other woman levelly.

Sandra sighs and nods in response with apparent understanding.

"You should ask him, though," Felicity offers up. "You need to have a better understanding of what's going on. As for why I do this…"

She takes a moment to get her thoughts together, rather than let everything tumble out in an epic babble she can't take back.

"I believe in him," she settles on eventually. "I've always believed in him. He has a good heart and good intentions and he needed my help. But more than that, doing this, helping him… it gave me purpose in a way I didn't have before. Working with him, being with him, doing all of this… it makes me better. And now… now it's just a part of me. And it's not a part I'd give up."

It's more candor than Sandra expected, but the other woman clearly respects Felicity's frankness. Nothing about this is easy. Even if it weren't for the League and Al Mobaath, even if it were just Oliver finding out about Connor, none of this would be simple. They'd still very suddenly be finding themselves trying to navigate each other to form some new sense of normal.

Plenty of women in Sandra's shoes would resent Felicity, the woman who Oliver actually chose to stay with, an unexpected female parental-type figure in her son's life. Likewise, plenty of women in Felicity's shoes would resent Sandra, the woman who bore Oliver's child and suddenly is a permanent fixture in their lives. But Sandra and Felicity - for all the ways they perfectly illustrate the before and after of Oliver's time on Lian Yu - are not most women.

"You aren't what I would have expected," Sandra tells her. "For him, I mean. The Ollie I knew…"

"He's not, though," Felicity tells the other woman swiftly and decisively. "He's not the Ollie you knew. You know that, right? After all he's been through? I mean, can you honestly tell me that you're the same person you were a decade ago? And you didn't even spend years on a deserted island fighting every day to survive."

"I guess I just have him sort of frozen in time in my head," Sandra admits.

"That's because you don't know him. Not now," Felicity tells her. "He'll surprise you, Sandra, if you give him the chance. He's going to be a great father to that amazing little boy you raised."

"And you?" Sandra asks hesitantly.

"And me what?" Felicity blinks back.

"How do you fit in all of this?" she asks, looking a little uneasy.

"I'm Oliver's partner," Felicity replies. "We can define what that means in terms of Connor later, but I love Oliver. I want what's best for him. I know that being there for Connor, being a part of his life, is so very important to him. I support that completely because I support him and - personal note - as a girl who grew up without a dad, I support it for Connor's sake, too.
"So, if you're asking me if I'll welcome Connor into our lives and our home, the answer is a resounding yes," she continues. "If you're asking if I'm going to try to mother him in your place, the answer is definitely no. You've raised an incredible little boy. You're his mom. I'm his dad's girlfriend. I get that. I know the difference. While I pretty much instantly considered him family, he's not my son. I respect the place you have in his life and I have no desire at all to get in the way of that."

There's a weight that lifts off of Sandra's shoulders at that. She breathes easier, her face softens, and she looks at Felicity like she's appraising her fully for the first time. Maybe she is.

"I think I owe you an apology," Sandra tells her after a moment.

"Pretty sure you don't," Felicity says slowly, going over the last several hours in her mind.

"I do," Sandra says more firmly. "I had a lot of preconceived notions about you. They weren't terribly kind."

"Oh, I get that a lot," Felicity says, waving the apology off.

"You do?" Sandra asks with a hint of surprise.

"Sure," Felicity replies. "Bottle-blonde younger assistant dating her billionaire boss? Even before I was dating Oliver, most people seemed to have some pretty uncharitable assumptions about me. Nevermind that I'm completely brilliant and might as well be co-CEO for how much Oliver and I work together. Not that I'd want the title."

"I… sort of thought you were just his secretary?" Sandra offers.

Felicity snorts at that.

"As if there's anything 'just' about being a secretary," she responds. "I'm not doing copies and coffee. I'm working through legal documents with him and helping develop company strategy and explaining technical jargon. I'm basically his right hand… Which I don't mean in a dirty way. Did that sound dirty? I wasn't making a sex comment because that would be completely inappropriate."

"How about we both agree to just ignore that whole part," Sandra suggests with a tight smile.

"Right. Good," Felicity smiles brightly. "Anyhow, I've been ignoring the rumor mill about me since before I started dating Oliver. Since before the whole Kissing-Gate scandal, even."

"Kissing-Gate?" Sandra asks amused.

"That's what I call it," Felicity tells her. "One little unfortunately placed photographer and boom… your life gets turned upside down faster than you can say '24-hour news channels.'"

"Yeah… I'm sort of anticipating that myself," Sandra confides, glancing back at Connor again.

"Don't worry about it," Felicity advises, looking back at her monitors briefly and tapping a few keys before turning back to Sandra. "Pamela will handle everything. I mean, the world is going to find out about Connor being Oliver's son. There's no avoiding that. But we'll control the story. Pamela is very good at her job."

Her words are some mixture of comforting and realistic and Sandra looks only slightly more at ease. That's good, really. Being too at ease right now would be sort of concerning. Sandra's whole world has turned upside down in the last two days.
"I don't know how you do this," Sandra sighs, running her hands through her hair. "How you cope with the media and the rumors and the uncertainty of it all."

"What other option is there?" Felicity asks her curiously.

Sandra opens her mouth like she's about to respond, but Felicity's phone rings and cuts her off. With a quick glance at the screen, Felicity holds up a finger indicating to give her a moment and takes the call.

"Hey. No hits yet," she greets. "Are Sara, Digg and Roy back yet?"

"They are," Oliver confirms with some rustling in the background. "And Nyssa's awake. I need to let the Bratva know she's joining you there."

"You're sending Nyssa here?" Felicity asks in surprise.

"She'd be a liability in the field at the moment and… hang on, I'm putting you on speaker phone," he tells her and the rustling continues for a moment before he speaks again. "Can you hear me still?"

"Yes," she confirms. "Why am I on speaker?"

"I'm getting ready. Needed both hands," he tells her, his voice sounding a little further away.

"Getting ready? …Are you getting changed into your Arrow-suit while we're on the phone?" she asks a little under her breath, shooting a look toward Sandra who is paying more attention to Connor than her.

"That's what you're focused on?" he chuckles.

"I'm multitasking," she counters.

"Right," he replies and she can hear the smile in his voice. "How's Connor?"

"He's bonding with Thea. I'm pretty sure she's teaching him Blackjack," Felicity tells him.

"And you aren't teaching him to count cards?" Oliver asks.

"His mom might not appreciate that," Felicity responds. "I'm trying to make a good impression. Let's save corrupting him with illegal gambling strategies until at least middle school."

Any other time, Oliver probably would have said something teasing back, but there's too much demanding his focus right now for the sort of levity that their interaction tends to breed.

"We're going to scout out some locations near the docks that Nyssa mentioned the League has used in the past," Oliver tells her. "It's a longshot, but…"

"It's somewhere to start," Felicity agrees. "I'll let you know when my systems get a hit. I'll turn my comm on as soon as we hang up. But, Oliver… be careful. If Nyssa knows about those locations and the League knows she knows then they might know that we know that she knows and then-"

"I get it," Oliver interrupts. "It could easily be a trap."

"Oh good," Felicity sighs. "I'm glad you followed that because I was starting to confuse myself."

She can almost hear him shaking his head affectionately at her.
"We'll have the comms on within ten minutes," he tells her. "Nyssa should be there very soon. Hand the phone over to Sergei?"

"Okay. Talk soon," she tells him. "I love you."

"Love you, too" he tells her.

She smiles to herself as she pulls the phone away from her ear and turns to the burly Russians, clearing her throat to grab their attention.

"He wants to talk to you," she tells Sergei, holding out the phone.

The man looks at the proffered phone warily, like it might explode at any moment, before scowling at her and taking it from her hand. She can't help but feel a little affronted at that because, seriously, she didn't even do anything.

"Everything okay?" Sandra asks a beat later, eyes surveying Felicity keenly. And… huh… maybe she was paying more attention than Felicity had given her credit for.

"Peachy," Felicity chirps before a steady stream of fast-clipped Russian draws her attention back to Sergei and his men.

"Да. Я понимаю," Sergei snaps crisply, hanging up the call and holding out the phone for Felicity. "So..." she says, snatching the phone from his fingers quickly and taking a step back. "Good chat?"

"Is difficult to protect the captain's family from outsiders if he invites outsiders to join them," the burly Russian tells her pointedly.

It is very much in their best interests, Bratva or not, that the Russian men not threaten Nyssa upon her arrival. Felicity can't imagine something as trivial as a wound would prevent the assassin from exacting lethal force if she thought herself in danger. Even recently drugged with a seriously injured arm and up against a gang of armed Russian mobsters, Felicity wouldn't bet against Nyssa Raatko in a fight.

"If you have a problem with it, you should have taken it up with your капитан," she tells him, horribly mangling her attempt at Russian but making a point all the same.

"This person who is to join you, how will we know this… friend?" Sergei asks pronouncing the words as if it tastes sour on his tongue.

"Um… she's 30-ish, long dark hair, looks like she could kill you with both arms tied behind her back," Felicity says before realizing that the Bratva might not be all that comfortable with her admittedly accurate description. "Not that she would, of course."

Felicity hopes she lies well. Nyssa would totally kill them. Especially if she had both hands tied behind her back.

"Also I'll be able to see her on the surveillance cameras," Felicity tells them cheerily, pointing toward her monitor. "Which… I can. Right now. Because she's here."

A loud rap on the door cuts off any further conversation, though, and the Russians, with automatic weapons at the ready, slide open the heavy door to reveal the dark-haired assassin.

"Nyssa!" Connor cries delightedly, abandoning his card game with Thea in favor of launching
himself across the room to hug Nyssa.

Nyssa keeps her eyes fixed on the Bratva with their weapons, but is possibly more thrown by Connor's blatant show of affection than anything else. Mobsters she can deal with. Guns are a walk in the park. But a ten-year-old hugging her… that's outside of Nyssa's comfort bubble.

"You're okay? I didn't hurt you, did I? How's your arm?" Connor asks her, looking up at her somewhat adoringly.

"I am well, child," she assures him, allowing a hand to settle on his shoulder. "My injury was not so grave as it may have appeared."

"I'm really glad you're here. I was worried," Connor tells her.

"Your father bade me watch over you," Nyssa informs him. "I have accepted this honor and will safeguard your life until Al Mobaath is defeated and my father threatens you no more."

"Your father?" Sandra asks warily, stepping a few uneasy paces toward her son and the assassin.

"Ra's al Ghul. The Demon's Head. Leader of the League of Assassins. We can know no peace until he ceases his pursuit of us," Nyssa clarifies.

"And how, exactly, do we expect that to happen?" Sandra asks.

"We end him, of course," Nyssa says as though it's obvious. "His survival would jeopardize ours."

"You're gonna kill your dad?" Connor asks, looking up at her with wide eyes.

There's a whole lot of heavy silence for a moment. The warning look that Sandra is shooting Nyssa is probably not something that the other woman is accustomed to and Felicity finds herself looking between the two as if there's a very engaging tennis match going on. Presuming she liked tennis, of course. Which she doesn't. But that's not really the point.

"You need not worry about my father's fate, whatever it might be," Nyssa says finally. "My charge is to protect you and I shall do so, in any way I must. Do you understand?"

"I… I guess so," Connor replies. "But… he's your dad."

"Not all fathers are like yours, Connor Hawke," Nyssa tells him. "We are not all so fortunate as you."

Connor's brow scrunches up as he thinks this over, nodding up at Nyssa. Sandra, however, looks far less mollified. She turns to Felicity, her back to Nyssa, and raises both eyebrows, her expression grave.

"I know she saved my son," Sandra says quietly. "And I'm grateful for that, even if I'm still more than a little upset at the circumstances. But as influences go…"

Felicity winces a little because Sandra has a point. But it's also more complicated than that, which Sandra doesn't seem to have fully grasped yet. Connor is The Arrow's son. He's Oliver Queen's son. Both of those things mean it's likely that he will be in danger again in the future. Thankfully, there's no shortage of people in his life who would defend him to the death, but that's bound to present some conflicting moral viewpoints in such an impressionable young boy.

"Felicity!" Thea calls suddenly and the blonde woman suddenly registers the sound of her computer
beeping incessantly. "You've got him. That's Tommy."

Sure enough, there on the screen is Tommy's recognizable face, wearing a near-unrecognizable emotionless expression.

Felicity scrambles back to the machine, clicking a few buttons to clarify his location, to try to get more angles on the building.

"Oliver! Are you there?" she asks into her comm piece.

"Yes," Oliver confirms. "What's going on."

"847 North Dockside Drive," Felicity tells him.

"You found him?" Sara's voice chimes in. "Any sign of Laurel?"

"Not that I can see," Felicity tells her, checking other camera angles of the building. "I don't see anyone but Tommy."

"He will not be alone," Nyssa says from over her shoulder at the same time as Tommy looks up directly into the camera. "His face is unobscured. This is not accidental. He wishes to be found."

"Oliver... he knows we're watching," Felicity says uneasily. "He's looking right at the camera. He'll be ready for you."

"Be careful, Oliver," Thea says, leaning in toward Felicity's comm so she can be heard.

"We'll bring him home," comes Oliver's determined response, the roar of his motorcycle silencing any conversation that might have followed.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A sense of expectation fills the air, the likes of which Felicity hasn't felt since her very first few weeks as a part of the team. She learned a long time ago that there's a lot of hurry-up-and-wait involved in what they do. Thea and Sandra, however, have yet to learn this.

"How far away are they now?" Thea asks a few minutes after asking for the first time.

"Is that the grown-up version of 'Are we there yet?'' Felicity questions, blinking at her.

The younger woman offers up an unimpressed, haughty scowl as a response. Leave it to Thea Queen to make a scowl look haughty. Despite that, Felicity does feel a pang of sympathy for the girl. Her brothers are about to fight each other and her… whatever Roy is to her these days is running headlong into the fray, too. She's got a whole lot on the line and, while she might have spent months on the run with Malcolm Merlyn with her own life in danger, having the people you love in harm's way is a whole different type of terror.

Felicity knows. She's been on both sides of that scenario. Repeatedly.

"They're at least another eight minutes out," Felicity says, taking pity on Oliver's sister.

Sandra sighs from the chair to Felicity's side while Thea paces like a caged wild animal.

"I should be out there," she asserts finally, frustration coloring her voice. "I should be with them!"

"Thea..." Felicity says cautiously.

"I don't know how you do this, Felicity!" Thea interrupts. "How can you sit here and wait and watch and just hope that everything goes well?"

"I can sit here because this is where they need me," Felicity reminds her. "And it's where they need you, too. You have to believe in them. Nine times out of ten, everything goes just fine."

"And the tenth time?" Sandra prods with a curious look.

Felicity hesitates at that, a dozen pulse-racing moments blurring together in her mind's eye - stab wounds and stitches, bullet wounds and broken limbs... terror like ice water in her veins as Oliver flatlines in front of her. But she can't tell Thea and Sandra that.

"This... isn't going to be one of those times," Felicity says, swallowing heavily and pushing back the memories.

"Forgive me if that's less than reassuring," Thea says, arms folded in front of herself.

"Oliver is going to win. He's going to bring Tommy home and rescue Laurel and make sure Connor is safe," Felicity insists more firmly. "Do you know why? Because there's no other outcome he'll accept. This isn't taking down drug dealers or smugglers or corrupt politicians. This is personal. This is his family. You've seen how hard he's fought to save the city. You can't even imagine how hard he'll fight to save the people he loves."

Thea looks a little calmed at that, studying Felicity's face as if she's looking for any trace of a lie. But
if that's what she's doing, she'll find none. Oliver's not perfect. Felicity knows that. But her faith in his dedication to protecting his family is absolute.

"Fighting doesn't necessarily mean winning," Sandra points out quietly, chancing a glance back toward Connor to make sure he's out of earshot as she speaks.

"It does when it's Oliver," Felicity insists, staunchly ignoring anything but those nine out of ten times. "You haven't seen him fight. He can do this. The team can do this."

Sandra looks hesitant to believe her. Maybe that's to be expected. Oliver is still 'Ollie' to her, a sometimes-college boy who parties too hard and shirks responsibility. She'll learn. Quickly. Felicity has no doubt of that. Thea, on the other hand, is nodding at her with cautious acceptance. That might be the best reaction that Felicity could have hoped for.

It's only the sudden quiet that makes Felicity realize how much time has passed. Eight minutes, at least.

"Talk to me, Felicity," Oliver says in her ear and Felicity finds herself grateful for the familiarity of the line.

"He went into the building ten minutes ago," she tells him. "No sign of him or anyone else since. There are cameras on three sides of the building and a partial view of the alley. I can see two entrances, but there's the chance there's another in the alley. City records don't show one, but you never know."

"And the roof?" Digg asks.

"I… might be in the process of commandeering an ARGUS satellite to get a view of the roof, but moving those things takes time," Felicity tells him.

"Which we don't have," Oliver says. "Let's-"

"Woah!" Felicity says as she simultaneously loses visuals on all four cameras she'd been monitoring. "Oliver, we're blind!"

"What?" he asks sharply.

"The feed is cut," she tells him, typing as fast as her fingers will let her. "I think literally. There's no trace of a signal."

He doesn't respond, though. Not with words, anyhow. She can hear the twang of his bowstring, the solid thwap of Sara's bo, the sharp clap of Digg's gun and the oomph of Roy's fist against someone's mid-section. They've been ambushed. They've been ambushed and Felicity can't do a damned thing to help.

"Get the satellite moved!" Oliver growls, all business.

"I'm on it," she replies, turning to the second keyboard and completely ignoring that Sandra has to scoot back to get out of her way.

This isn't really the kind of thing she can rush, but she's sure as hell going to try. Thea and Sandra are full of questions. They can't hear the comm feed, but they can see the lack of a video feed and it's making both of them - especially Thea - very antsy.

"What's going on?" Thea asks after a few moments, voice uncertain and edgy.
"Hold on," Felicity says mindlessly, fighting with her keyboards.

"I need to know what's going on!" Thea insists.

"That's what I'm trying to find out!" Felicity snaps at her, momentarily glancing away from her screens.

Thea looks taken aback at that and Felicity feels bad about it for a couple of seconds before she reminds herself that she doesn't have that luxury at the moment. There are considerably more pressing issues than her boyfriend's sister's hurt feelings.,

"Nine minutes on the satellite," she tells Oliver.

"We don't have that long. Where's the second door?" Sara asks. "They have the main entrance covered and we need to get inside. They're shooting from the roof. We're like fish in a barrel."

"Um…" Felicity says, pulling up the floorplan from City Hall again. "West side, about two hundred feet from the northwest corner. Which rooftop are they shooting from?"

"The building to the south," Oliver tells her. "Three storeys, looks like a warehouse."

"Owned by Dockside Shipping and Storage?" Felicity asks anxiously.

"That's the name on the building," Roy confirms.

Felicity lets out a whoop of delight and raises her fist in triumph. Because that's a thing she actually does, apparently regardless of the direness of circumstances.

"I have their internal cameras," she tells the team. "If you can get in, the first two floors are clear."

"Split up," Oliver orders. "Digg, you're with me. Sara and Roy, take cover out here and keep them busy."

"How many are you dealing with?" Felicity asks.

"At least a dozen on the roof. We've taken down six in hand-to-hand," Digg tells her.

"We're at the second building," Oliver redirects. "Opening the door now."

Felicity watches on the monitor, but nothing changes. The door doesn't open. There's no Digg on her screen, no Oliver. It takes her just a moment to figure out what's happened. And when she does, fear trickles down her spine in an almost tangible way.

"They have the feed on a loop! It's a trap!" Felicity cries, panic rising in her voice.

Her warning comes a split second before the sounds of conflict intensify sharply. She simultaneously wants time to speed up so the satellite is in place and for it to flat-out stop because she can't control this. They're outmanned and ambushed and she can't even see what's happening and this is all going completely sideways.

There's a sudden, loud cry of pain that send a fresh surge of panic through Felicity. It's too close, too loud to be the League.

It's one of her boys. One of her boys is hurt.

"Digg!" Oliver shouts. "John, hang on!"
"Oh my god," Felicity says, hand covering her mouth as the satellite finally moves into place and she gets a clear view of Digg with an arrow lodged in his middle and Oliver pulling him away from the building.

"Fall back!" Oliver cries. "We need to get out, now. I need cover. Help me get Digg to the van."

Sara and Roy are at his side moments later, Roy covering the roofline and Sara helping Oliver carry John while pointing his gun at the doorway they'd just attempted to go through.

"They're shooting at the van," Oliver says. "We need a distraction."

"On it," Felicity announces.

"What are you doing?" Thea asks nervously.

"The only thing I can," Felicity answers as she punches commands into her computer. "I'm setting off their fire suppression system."

And, sure enough, the building's alarm sounds, pulling the League members' attentions away from the retreating team for a couple of seconds.

"Go now!" Felicity orders, knowing well that the distraction won't last long.

She's right. Sara shoots two League members as they stumble out the door, coughing from the chemical mixture Felicity let loose into the warehouse. But the team manages to get Digg into the van before the League fully regroups. They'll have to go back for Oliver's motorcycle later. There's no time, now.

"Get the medical equipment ready, Felicity," Oliver tells her. "And have the Bratva patrol outside for men in League gear. Tell them 'У меня есть сообщение от капитан.' Then explain what we need them to do. They should listen."

"You think we'll be counterattacked?" Felicity asks, looking nervously at Connor as she moves toward the medical equipment.

"I don't know," Oliver tells her. "Maybe. But I think I'd prefer the Bratva not have confirmation that I'm the Arrow and I am not going to have a chance to change."

The odds of the Bratva men missing that the Arrow is walking with Oliver Queen's friends into Oliver Queen's secret hideout without Oliver Queen are not good. But now isn't the time to point that out and frankly Felicity's pretty sure he knows that anyhow.

"How bad is John?" Felicity asks nervously, unrolling a kit of sterilized surgical tools.

"I don't know," Oliver tells her after a beat. "It's lower abdominal. I can't tell how deep. Maybe it just tore through some muscle or..."

Or maybe it perforated his intestines and his chances of survival are nearly non-existent, she finishes in her head. He doesn't have to say it. She knows. And, really, it's better to not hear it out loud. She's not sure she could take that.

Felicity sucks in a breath and blinks back tears at that because... god, she can't lose John. She can't. He's her best friend and brother and a core part of their team. She realizes after a moment that she's nodding instead of responding. Oliver can't hear that. Obviously.
"We should call Lyla," Oliver tells her softly.

"Yeah, I… I got it," Felicity tells him.

"We're clear of the League and ten minutes out," Oliver tells her. "I need to concentrate on John. I'm going to disconnect the comms. But before I do, give them the message. 'У меня есть сообщение от капитана.'"

"Okay," Felicity says, turning toward Sergei and his men who are already eyeing her curiously. "I have a message for you guys. From Oliver. He says to tell you У меня есть сообщение от капитана."

Her pronunciation is horrid. She knows it. But it's intelligible, anyhow. At least she thinks it is. So she's both a little confused and affronted when the men start chuckling and shaking their heads at her patronizingly.

"Americans… У меня есть сообщение от капитана means 'I have a message for you from the captain,'" one of Sergei's men says somewhat disdainfully.

Felicity's not a fan of them, she decides. She'll be very grateful when their help is no longer needed. So what if she can't speak Russian? She's pretty sure none of them can read binary, so whatever.

"What is the message?" Sergei prods.

"He wants you all to patrol nearby and watch for men in League armor," Felicity tells him.

"And what is this League armor? How will we identify these men?" Sergei asks.

"Uh… you'll know them when you see them. They look like ninjas. You can't miss them. Or, well, actually, they're really good at being stealthy so I guess you can miss them. But if you see them, you'll know it's them," she clarifies.

"They dress much as I do," Nyssa offers up. "However, their faces will be concealed."

"So, капитан calls us in to guard you then commands us to leave and hunt these men?" Sergei asks suspiciously.

"It's still protecting us," Felicity points out. "Just from a different vantage point. Some of our friends are coming back. You're only looking for the assassins."

"I do not like this," Sergei tells her, eyes narrowing in her direction. "It is bad strategy."

"Well, it's the orders from your captain, so too bad," she tells him bluntly.

"This one… she acts like a Pakhan's wife, but she's a captain's шлюха," one of the other men sneers.

"I have no idea what that means, but I think I'm offended," Felicity tells him blankly as Sergei slaps the man upside the back of his head.

"ты чё, сука, охуел, бля?" Sergei asks the man irately. "капитан will have your head if he hears you speak about his woman like this. Не будь дураком."

"Now I'm sure I'm offended," Felicity clarifies. "But I also don't have time for this and neither do you. Go. Oliver will let you know when his orders change."

She's trying their patience. That much is obvious from the glares cast her way, but the men follow
her orders, follow Oliver's orders, and at this point that's the most important thing.

"I don't like trusting them, Oliver," Felicity tells him through the comm.

"We'll talk about it later," he tells her. "I'm not happy about it either and I want to know everything they said to you, but right now I need to concentrate on John. Call Lyla and get the medical equipment ready. We'll be there soon."

"Okay," she agrees. "Take care of him. We'll be ready."

With that, she pulls the comm unit out of her ear and throws it on the desk before running her hands through her hair in frustration.

"What's going on?" Sandra asks.

"I was wrong. It's the tenth time," Felicity says as explanation. "They're headed back and... and John's hurt. It's bad. He took an arrow to the stomach. I need to call Lyla."

"They're headed here?" Sandra asks with wide eyes. "Not a hospital?"

"How would we explain this to a hospital?" Felicity asks her.

"Is one of you a doctor?" Sandra asks.

"No, but we've all gotten pretty good at patching each other up," Felicity says, not feeling her usual sense of confidence.

This isn't the same as a through-and-through to the arm or a cut to the abdomen. This could be major surgery. It could be life or death. She's not all that sure they're ready for that.

"Fine," Sandra says with grit. "Do you have any lidocaine?"

"What?" Felicity blinks at her. "Is that a trick question? Why?"

"I'm an OR nurse," Sandra tells her, moving toward the sink to scrub her hands. "If you're not going to take him to the hospital, you're going to need my help."

"Wow, I am way more grateful for you than I could have possibly imagined," Felicity says without thinking. "Oh god, I'm sorry. That sounded horrible, didn't it?"

Sandra looks more amused than offended, though, so that's a relief. She's raised an eyebrow in Felicity's direction but she also looks like she's actively fighting smiling.

"Don't worry about it. Anyone else have medical training?" she questions.

"Lyla, who I have to call," Felicity says. "All my experience has been on-the-fly and very hands-on."

"No, none at all," Thea says.

"My knowledge of anatomy is vast, but it is not focused on healing," Nyssa states proudly.

"Well, that will have to do," Sandra says after a pause where she probably is registering that Nyssa's knowledge of anatomy is due entirely to being well-versed in the varying ways to kill someone. "Thea, grab the rubbing alcohol and wipe down the table. Nyssa, I'm going to need you to scrub in and assist me. Felicity, call John's wife."
It's impressive the way Sandra takes charge and Felicity finds she's grateful for it. There have been too many close calls in the past, too many times where one of them survived due to sheer luck and willpower. Having someone with them who has actual, working medical knowledge and operating room experience... it's a relief.

"How can I help?" Connor asks, looking determined, nervous and uncertain all at once.

Sandra pauses, her hands stilling in the scalding hot water mid-scrub. Her eyes lock with her little boy's and Felicity knows with absolute certainty that Sandra would give nearly anything for him to be somewhere else, somewhere safe where he doesn't have to watch his mother perform emergency surgery on one of his dad's friends. What surprises her, is that Felicity feels much the same way. No ten-year-old should have to see this, but that it's Connor makes it so much worse.

"You can help me," Felicity offers after a moment when it's clear that Sandra doesn't have an answer. "After I call Lyla, you and I are going to find blankets, pillows, see what we have for food and spare clothes. It's late. No one had dinner. I'm sure we're all tired and hungry. We can help that way, okay?"

"Okay," Connor agrees.

The look Sandra shoots Felicity is pure gratefulness and Felicity finds herself smiling back easily. 'Thank you' Sandra mouths towards her and Felicity nods in response.

It's a blur of activity from there. Thea works on sterilizing the workspace and setting out medical equipment while Nyssa and Sandra finish washing up and pull on surgical gloves. Connor pokes through cabinets while Felicity makes a really difficult call to Lyla, who probably handles things better than Felicity does and immediately says she's on her way. It's barely two minutes, though, before Roy's pulling the door open and Oliver and Sara drag Digg into the room.

Felicity can't help the strangled noise that escapes her. Digg looks bad and she just... she just can't. Can't deal. Can't process. Can't think. This is Digg and she's terrified for him. He's unconscious, his pallor is terrible and even with a black shirt and pants she can see the blood that's sopped through the fabric, making it glisten and tingling the air with the harsh smell of iron. There's a lot of it. Too much. It scares the hell out of her. But the scariest thing is the arrow lodged in John's mid-section that Sara and Oliver are trying very hard not to jostle as they move him.

"Get him on the table," Sandra orders, barely doing a double-take at Oliver dressed in his leathers. "How long has he been out."

"Maybe five minutes," Oliver tells her as he and Sara hoist Digg up onto the table.

"Did you give him anything?" Sandra asks, grabbing scissors and cutting the shirt away from his wound.

"No," Oliver replies. "You're a doctor?"

"Nurse," Sandra corrects automatically, paying him virtually no attention as she focuses on the patient in front of her.

"...Dad?" Connor asks a little breathlessly, his eyes wide and stunned.

Felicity's breath catches in her throat at that. In all the rush to get the Bratva out and call Lyla and prep for Digg's arrival, she'd completely forgotten that Oliver would be coming back as The Arrow and Connor had no idea about his father's alter-ego.
From the look on Oliver's still-masked face, it seems as though he'd forgotten, too.

"Connor, I…" Oliver starts, eyes darting back to Digg for a moment and then toward his son.

"Go talk to him. I've got this," Sandra tells Oliver sharply, looking up from where she's examining Digg's wound.

Oliver nods and looks toward Connor, drawing back his hood as he takes a step towards the boy. Even from her place at Digg's side, holding his hand, Felicity can see Connor gulp and his eyes widen further.

"You're… you're one of the Arrows?" Connor asks in disbelief.

"Yeah, Connor. I am," Oliver tells him, stopping a few feet in front of his son and pulling his mask off.

Connor looks like he doesn't know how to deal with this revelation and Felicity's heart goes out to the boy. He's been through a tremendous amount these past two days. It would be a lot for anyone to take, but it's got to be especially difficult for a ten-year-old.

"But you don't have superpowers, right?" Connor asks warily, his eyes darting back toward Digg who Connor's mother has just pulled an arrow out of.

"No," Oliver confirms. "No superpowers. Just a really great team and good aim."

"Then why?" Connor asks, looking a little like he might cry.

"Why what?" Oliver asks.

"Why be the Arrow?" Connor challenges. "Why do you have to do this?"

Even from halfway across the room, Felicity can see Oliver's shoulders droop and his face fall a little at his son's words. He was as ill-prepared for Connor's judgement as Connor was for the revelation of his alter-ego. She's not sure which one of them she'd like to hug most at the moment.

"I, uh… I would have thought you wouldn't object so much, with how much you liked The Flash," Oliver tells him with a sad little half-smile.

"Sure, I like superheroes and all," Connor tells him shakily. "But I like having a dad more. I don't want you to get hurt. You don't have superpowers. You could die."

The water in the boy's eyes spills over at that last word and Oliver automatically goes to reach for his son before realizing that his hands are covered in Digg's blood. He looks at his hands for a moment, red-stained fingertips reaching for his boy. Felicity can practically hear his thoughts.

She knows without a doubt that he's blaming himself for tainting his son with this darkness, with spreading the blood on his hands into Connor's life. But he's also not the man he was a year or two ago and he doesn't force the distance between them that he might have back then.

"Everybody dies, Connor," Oliver tells him, wrapping his arms around the boy and pulling him close while trying not to touch him with his hands. "What matters is how we live… my dad taught me that. Your grandfather. It's a big part of why I do this, why I became The Arrow."

"I just want you to be my dad," Connor sniffs into his father's chest, his face pressed against the green leather.
"I am. I will be," Oliver tells him, kissing the top of the boy's head. "I promise. I'm okay. We're both okay. This will all be over soon and we'll be safer and we'll spend time together and we can go to baseball games or go fishing. All that stuff. Whatever you want. Okay?"

"Can you… can you teach me to shoot a bow and arrow?" Connor asks slightly hesitantly as he looks up at his father.

"Careful what you ask for, kid, or he'll have you slapping water for a month," Roy chimes in from near the door.

Oliver shoots his protege a dark look before turning back to Connor.

"I would be happy to teach you to shoot. If your mother is okay with it," Oliver tells him.

Connor nods very seriously at this idea as he steps back a little, away from his father. Felicity has to wonder, given the little bit she's seen of Connor's protective nature so far, how much of his sudden desire to learn archery has to do with bonding with his father and how much of it has to do with wanting the skills to help protect his father. She's willing to bet that there's a hefty amount of the latter. He is, in some ways, very much his father's son.

"I think we're good," Sandra says suddenly, drawing everyone's attention back to where she's been working on Digg. "I can't be certain, but I don't think his intestines were perforated, just a whole lot of muscle damage and blood loss. We'll need to watch him closely for signs of haemorrhage or peritonitis, just in case. And he'll need to have his blood pressure and heart rate checked regularly. If its elevated or if he has abdominal pain or rigidity near the wound, he's going to the hospital. I don't care how we have to explain it."

"Thank you," Lyla says from Digg's side.

And… huh, when did she get here? Apparently having your best friend being operated on and your boyfriend's secret identity revealed to his newly discovered long-lost child is somewhat distracting.

"You make a terrible pincushion, Johnny," Lyla says affectionately to her still-unconscious husband, touching the side of his face.

"He needs antibiotics and painkillers," Sandra advises. "And rest. A lot of it. He passed out from a combination of pain and blood loss. He should be awake soon, but he'll probably wish he wasn't."

"I'm glad you were here," Lyla tells the other woman. "I appreciate everything you've done for us."

Felicity can't help but agree. Sandra's skillset is invaluable.

"What now?" Sara asks, piping up from Nyssa's side as the dark-haired assassin washes blood off of her hands.

"We're down a team member, no one's eaten or slept in the last… twelve hours. We walked straight into a trap," Oliver observes as Connor yawns widely right in front of him. "I'm not sure what we can do?"

"We have to get my sister back!" Sara snaps. "Ollie… you have no idea how dangerous the League is, what they could do to her."

"I have a very good idea of how dangerous they are and what they can do to her," Oliver counters. "But if we go after them right now, we're a danger to ourselves and we're not doing Laurel any good by getting ourselves hurt or killed trying to rescue her. We're human, Sara. We need sleep."
"He is correct, beloved," Nyssa chimes in. "I know you do not wish to hear it, but we must rest, regroup and strategize, or our battle is lost before it is waged. You know this to be true, as distasteful as I know it seems to you."

Sara huffs a noise of supreme frustration and crosses her arms, perhaps in an attempt to refrain from hitting something.

"As soon as we've had some rest," Oliver reassures her. "We will get them back, Sara. I swear to you. We will."

There's enough intensity in his voice to satisfy Sara, apparently, because the blonde is nodding her head as she stares at Oliver piercingly. She's willing to follow his lead. For now. But Felicity doesn't think anyone in the room is fooled into thinking her patience will last more than the span of a nap.

"I took the liberty of finding us an ARGUS safe house in town that's not currently in use," Lyla tells them.

"What?" Oliver asks in surprise.

"You've got one twin-sized cot here, a room full of people ready to pass out and your apartment is so unsecured at the moment that it literally doesn't even have a door," Lyla points out. "What were you going to do with everyone? Check into a hotel?"

Yes, Felicity decides immediately as she takes in Oliver's reaction. This is exactly what his plan had been.

"I already moved Malcolm. And re-drugged him," Lyla tells them.

"And Waller's okay with all this?" Oliver asks warily.

"Waller has no idea we're doing this," Lyla tells him. "It's off the books and it's going to stay that way. Are you objecting to the offer of a secluded lake house with state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, a panic room, and a basement that doubles as an armory?"

"No, that is not a thing we're objecting to," Felicity chimes in decisively. "At all. Right Oliver?"

"Right," Oliver agrees, jarred into reacting by Felicity's prodding. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Lyla tells him. "We should get-"

"Where's Thea?" Roy asks suddenly, drawing everyone's attention.

The backup lair is large, but it's not that large, and there are very few places to disappear to. And yet… there's no sign of Thea.

"Where the hell is she?" Oliver growls, looking a little frantic.

"Oh my God…" Felicity breathes, her voice trailing off a little at the end. "Oliver…"

Thea's not in the lair. That's as clear as day because she's right there on Felicity's monitor, walking up to the main entrance of the warehouse that Tommy's been holed up in.

Oliver, Sara and Roy are out the door before Felicity has a chance to say another word.
Big thank you to PunchDrunkDoc for her medical knowledge and advice in this chapter. The next chapter is a doozy, guys. Expect it next weekend. :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Just as an added warning... the violence tag is earned this chapter. And the next chapter should maybe have a tag that says "creepy." It'll be up next Sunday or Monday. Enjoy!

It should be a dark and stormy night, right? That's how these things go. It's supposed to be gritty and atmospheric, the weather reflecting her inner turmoil and all that. But it's not.

Of all the things in the world for Thea Queen to be upset by right now, the weather not mirroring her internal conflict probably shouldn't even be on the list.

But it is.

Circumstances aside, Thea's never been particularly welcoming of anything not bending to her will. Being irked at a cloudless, balmy night is easier to process than being upset at her brainwashed, undead half-brother or her sociopathic villain of a father or even her good-intentioned, heroic half-brother who would protect her at far too high a cost.

She'd driven quickly, taken her own car which was maybe a mistake. Oliver will come after her. She knows this in her bones and she's got no idea how much of a head start she has on him. The van would have been the better choice, limited how much of the team could have come along with him.

Now, with her car parked next to Oliver's motorcycle, she's making her way with stoic determination toward the building where he'd fought less than an hour before. She doesn't look back at the motorcycle. It makes her think too sharply of Oliver.

He's going to be so mad. Madder than the time when she was eight and crashed her bicycle into his Maserati, leaving a nice long scratch up the side. Even then, he'd been more upset at the scrapes on her knees and elbows than on his car. He's a good brother, the best brother. Even at his worst, he looked out for her, loved her. She knows that. And now… now it's her turn to play that role.

Enough people have already suffered because the League hasn't been able to get ahold of her. She's done seeing people hurt when she can do something about it.

Still, she thinks, looking skyward to the dull starscape washed out by too-bright city lights, she wishes it were raining. But, then, she's not the one crafting this story and she has less control than she likes to think she does.

"You can come out of the shadows," she says loudly without turning her face away from the sky. "I know you're there."

Three men in League armor emerge from the darkness, nocturnal predators hunting her as she strides towards Tommy and Laurel and the inevitable conclusion of all of this.

"Take me to my brother," she demands, her voice unwavering. "It's past time for us to have a little chat."
Laurel had heard the tell-tales sounds of fighting outside. She'd known it was Oliver and Sara and the others. But the rescue she'd been hoping for had never come. When the sounds of gunfire and conflict died off and the squeal of a car's tires followed, she was nearly sick. It struck her as hard as any physical blow could.

They'd fought and they'd failed. It was unthinkable, unimaginable.

It was reality.

Was Oliver okay? Was Sara? They wouldn't have just given up. Not unless someone was seriously injured or killed. And, oh God, that sends a wave of nausea over her that leaves her dry heaving violently from the chair she's still tied to. Is Sara dead? For real, this time? Is she bleeding out right now in the back of the van, her eyes going blank and her arms going slack? She doesn't know if she can take that again. She's sure her father can't.

She barely notices the nondescript League member reporting something to Al Mobaath about the fight. She wants to hear his words. She does. But all she can hear is the thunder of her own pulse, the too-fast rhythm of her own breath.

Tommy is not Tommy. Oliver failed. Someone is hurt or dead. And she is still tied to this chair.

If she lets out a mournful sob, it's completely understandable. Unless, of course, you're a brainwashed, resurrected Tommy Merlyn.

"Pull yourself together," he orders, looking at her coldly.

The lack of warmth in his gaze does absolutely nothing to descalate the situation for her.

"Is Sara… Is my sister dead?" Laurel manages after a moment, nearly gagging on the words.

He doesn't have to answer. And if he does, he has no reason to tell her the truth. She knows this. She is completely at his mercy, of which he has very little. But she asks anyhow. She has to.

The way he appraises her, watches and calculates and weighs his response nearly sends her into a fresh set of dry heaves. Watching Al Mobaath from behind the mask of Tommy's face is enough to make her go into mourning for him all over again. If this is all he is now, if this is all he'll ever be, she's not sure how she'll get past that.

"No," he tells finally. "She killed five of my men. No one managed to even touch her."

"Then who… Who was…?" Laurel asks, unable to quite finish her sentence.

"John Diggle was shot in the stomach," Al Mobaath tells her impassively. "He might survive, with appropriate medical attention. If he's lucky."

Laurel doesn't know John well, not compared to the others, and her gut reaction is to be relieved that it's not Oliver or Sara who's hurt. She can't control that. But, oh does she feel terrible about it. Immediately. John Diggle owes her nothing. He's a husband and a father and a friend and right now he might be dying or dead and she's relieved that it's not someone else in his place? What does that say about her?
She sobs, not bothering to try and hold back the tears in her eyes. They're warranted. She cries for herself, for her raw wrists and ankles and the sense of hopelessness that's settled over her like a smothering blanket. She cries for John and his wife and his baby girl who might never remember her father. She cries for Oliver who has no good options and so many responsibilities, for Felicity who might be watching her friend die and her boyfriend fall apart, for Sara and her father who have to be panicking, for Thea who will blame herself for everything, for the little boy she barely caught a glimpse of at Oliver and Felicity's apartment who has to be terrified and growing up entirely too fast.

And she cries for Tommy.

Tommy who laughed and joked and loved her even when maybe she didn't deserve it. Tommy, who is as dead as when she put him in the ground, but whose corpse is staring her down.

He should have stayed dead.

She feels like a traitor for even thinking it, but oh God, he should have stayed dead.

"You're weaker than I thought," he tells her and she laughs through her tears.

"That happens when you're human," she counters. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

There's no emotion on his face at her words, not exactly, but he does pause, freeze momentarily, and she's not sure what that means. He's a walking contradiction. Alive and dead. Tommy and not. She doesn't have it in her to figure him out. Not now. She's well past her breaking point.

It's a little frightening how much she'd like a drink right now.

"What do you want with me?" she demands, pain morphing into anger. "Why am I even here?"

"I told you. You're leverage, bait," he reminds her, crouching down to her level. "There is nothing I want from you."

"That's right. You're after your own sister, who you loved like family before you even knew she was your sister. So you can torture her in front of your father, right? Laurel counters. "You're after a child with no connection to your father so you can make him suffer, too? Right? Why? Because you were told to?"

"I don't expect you to understand," he tells her, echoing her own words back at her. "This is bigger than you can grasp."

"And it's more personal than you can grasp," she spits at him.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he challenges.

"It means that just because you don't understand your emotional attachments doesn't mean you don't feel them," she informs him. "It means there is no incarnation of you that will ever feel nothing towards Thea."

"I feel duty. And the weight of destiny," Al Mobaath informs her.

"You're a terrible liar," she hisses back. "You always were."

His expression contorts in anger, something that she counts as a victory since it's actual emotion, but before he has a chance to say anything at all, the door opens and Laurel's heart sinks dramatically at the sight in front of her.
Thea, proud as ever with her head held high and poorly masked fear, strides into the room flanked by Tommy's men.

"I have to say, I thought it would take a lot more to get effort to capture you," Tommy says, standing and turning toward the girl.

"Thea, no," Laurel tells her, shaking her head. "You can't be here!"

"I'm not going to let others suffer because you're trying to get to me," Thea asserts. "You have me. That's what you wanted. Let Laurel go."

"No, Thea, not for me," Laurel insists, even though it's far too late for that. "You shouldn't have come."

Al Mobaath ignores her, but he's clearly weighing Thea's words. For the first time since all of this started, Laurel wonders if he has a plan for her beyond the confines of the chair he's tied her to.

"The League does not take prisoners," one of the henchmen says, stepping forward toward Al Mobaath. "And it surely does not release them."

Anger shades Al Mobaath's face as he looks down at the other man, eyes narrowing at the challenge.

"You're mistaking yourself for being in charge," he tells him drolly. "You'll want to correct that. Immediately."

"Ra's al Ghul is in charge," the man states. "We act by his will, in his stead. And the League does not take prisoners. It takes lives, in the name of vengeance. You damned them both from the moment of their capture."

The atmosphere shifts on a dime. Al Mobaath takes a large step backwards, watching the three men in front of him with fresh eyes, reassessing them as threats. It's still cold, still analytical, but there something different there. And, watching those three men herself, for the first time Laurel wonders if Al Mobaath is any more in control of this situation than she is.

"As Warith al Ghul, your duties are clear," the man to Thea's left tells him. "If you will not execute Ra's al Ghul's will, then you are not a worthy heir."

"Laurel Lance must die," the man on Thea's other side says. "And Thea Queen must suffer in her father's stead."

"You must bend to my will," Al Mobaath challenges. "I am the heir and I will not have my commands subject to your approval. They both live, for now, and you are to take no action against them."

What happens next will play out in Laurel's mind, both awake and asleep, for the rest of her life. They won't ever talk about it, but she's pretty sure the same is true for Thea. Sometimes it will play out in slow motion, sometimes so fast it's blinding, a blur of black and steel. In the moment, though, it's both. A contradictory blend of sluggish movement on her part and inhuman speed on the part of the League.

One of the men moves towards her, sword drawn and eyes unfeeling, almost mechanical. Another stalks towards Al Mobaath, weapon raised in challenge, but Al Mobaath still looks more irked at the insolence than anything else. There's nothing of Tommy in his eyes. Not when Laurel cries out and wrenches her already raw wrists and feet in a futile attempt to break through her binds. Not when a sword is held across her neck. Not even when she screams with what she thinks may well be her last
breath.

It's not enough. She's not enough to get through to him. She's made progress, being here. She knows that, but he is so far gone, he's slipped out of her reach and she might have died for it. She probably would have, had they been the only ones in the room.

But they aren't.

The third man grabs Thea roughly, yanks her arm behind her at an unnatural angle and Thea cries out in some mixture of pain and terror. She sounds so, so young. Far younger than her years, a child crying out in fear.

It makes Laurel think of a little girl in braids and a pink tutu, twisting her ankle while twirling in her father's parlor. It makes her think of long, gangly pre-teen limbs that curled around herself protectively and the pained wails that spilled past her lips as she sat curled in the corner of the sofa, unable to stop watching media coverage of the Gambit lost at sea.

"Tommy!" Thea cries, her voice unsteady.

Laurel is suddenly, starkly reminded that she has known Thea Queen since she was in diapers, a toddler chasing after Oliver and her and Tommy. And Tommy, it seems, is reminded of this, too.

The man holding Thea has a knife in his eye in an instant. He falls backwards, dead before he hits the ground, if Laurel has to guess. It's gory, buried to the hilt, and bile might be rising in Laurel's throat at the sight if she didn't have more immediate concerns about the sword at her neck. Thea, however, shrieks and stumbles away a few steps. Good. She should get away, far and fast. It was a mistake for her to come here, she's risked too much, no matter how this all turns out.

The bite of the blade against her throat pulls Laurel's attention away from Thea and the body on the ground. She can feel the too-sharp steel split her skin, knows the trickle of blood running down her neck is just the beginning. In the distance, she can hear Thea scream her name, but she's past words at this point, too terrified to so much as draw a deep breath, knowing that it will only press the blade further into her throat.

But, as swiftly as it started, it stops. No more press of the blade against her throat, no more cruel, cold grip on her shoulder. It takes a moment before she looks to the side, to where the League member had been so ready and eager to take her life. She finds, instead, his body sprawled out beside her chair, a knife lodged firmly through the artery in his neck.

Her gaze whips back to Al Mobaath… to Tommy. He's locked in combat with the last League member, their movements both fluid and exacted with deadly precision. Tommy could not have done this. Tommy wouldn't have known how. But… but Al Mobaath would not have spared her, would he? He would not have turned against his own men. So who is he now? She's terrified to find she has hope yet again.

Thea regroups faster than Laurel might have expected, but then the girl has spent months on end with no one for company but Malcolm Merlyn. That has to mess with a person. In spite of that, she's surprised to find Thea scurry to her side and pause only a second before reaching for the blade protruding from the dead League member's neck.


But Thea pays her no heed, instead gripping the hilt of the blade and exhaling a few steadying breaths before bracing her foot against the man's sternum and yanking out the knife.
"Not without you," Thea tells her, using the blade to slide through Laurel's bindings. Maybe it's selfish. Laurel knows the sort of fate that awaits Thea if the League has her. She wouldn't wish that on the girl. She wouldn't wish that on anyone, but she's ever so grateful for Thea's choices as the rope slackens and fresh air stings at the wounds on her wrists and ankles.

Adrenaline surges through her, through both of them probably, and the drive to run, to survive is stronger than anything else Laurel has ever felt. She grabs Thea's hand and yanks as she rises to her feet unsteadily, barely even feeling the injuries she knows she's incurred, but Thea's feet are solidly planted and it stops Laurel in her tracks.

With some immeasurable mixture of incredulity and panic, Laurel turns to the girl.

"We have to go!" she insists, yanking again, but Thea doesn't move.

When she follows the younger girl's fixed gaze, it's quite obvious why.

The last of the assassins has been beaten, a long slice of Al Mobaath's blade causing tremendous blood loss, much of it sprayed across Tommy. It's on his face, covering his hands, soaking his clothes, and he's staring down at his hands like he doesn't recognize them at all.

"...Tommy?" Thea asks, boldly taking a step toward him. His trance-like gaze breaks at her voice and he looks up from his bloodied hands to Thea. His face is all fear and confusion. It twists something deep in Laurel's gut, pains her and leaves her with a wild, desperate kind of hope surging through her, adding to the mixture of adrenaline and terror.

"Thea?" he asks, finally, his voice breaking on the single syllable. "What did I… Oh my god, what did I do? What did I do?"

Horror curtains across his face as he looks down to his shaking, blood-stained hands. His feet falter, stumbling backwards and his knees fail him. Thea's not at his side in time to catch him - as if her slight form truly could - but she's there an instant later, heedless of the ever-growing pool of blood inching their direction as she collapses at his side, wrapping her arms around him and drawing him close.

"It's okay. Tommy, it's okay. It'll be okay," she tells him, clinging to his shaking form. "It's not. It's not," he says, shaking his head fiercely. "I was going to… to you, I was going to… I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know. I know," she soothes. "I'm here. I'm okay. I forgive you. It's not your fault."

The mournful noise that escapes him morphs into a sob, a desperate sorrowful cry the likes of which echo of his funeral.

She wants to walk over, wrap her arms around him, too. Tell him Thea's right. Tell him she forgives him, that she missed him - oh God how she missed him. But her feet won't listen to her. She's frozen, stock-still and staring, her breath lodged in her throat and her heart pounding in her chest.

"Laurel… Laurel," he says, choking out her name, looking over Thea's shoulder as the girl cradles her brother's head. "Oh God, did he hurt you? Did I… are you okay?"

"I'll… I'll be fine," she manages, unsure of quite how honest that is.
She hasn't seen him like this since three days after the Gambit sunk, seemingly taking his best friend with it beneath the waves. A surprisingly sober, sobbing, lost little boy who couldn't cope showed up on her father's doorstep looking for answers she'd never had.

She doesn't have them now, either.

The door bursts inward suddenly and, somewhat predictably, Oliver, Roy and Sara pour into the room, weapons at the ready and primed for a fight.

"Don't hurt him!" Thea cries out, holding Tommy protectively against her.

"Laurel!" Sara shouts, hurrying to her sister's side and examining her neck with a focused and worried face.

It looks like a choker of blood. She knows it. The thin slice across her neck, the bite of the blade wasn't enough to do serious damage, but it might be enough to leave a scar and it was surely enough to worry her sister.

"Are you okay?" Sara asks seriously, apparently deeming the neck wound non-life threatening and piercing her with her intense blue eyes.

It throws her for a moment, seeing Sara like this. Part of her will always expect her sister to be the carefree wild child of their youth. But none of them is the same as they once were these days. If that hadn't been clear before today, it surely is now.

"Laurel," Sara says more insistently.

"I'll be okay," Laurel tells her finally, forcing a smile. "Really."

Sara looks back and nods towards Oliver, but he's barely paying attention to them. Not with Thea wrapped around Tommy like that, not with a pool of blood encompassing them both and Tommy's wracking sobs. Not with Tommy seeming more like Tommy than any time in recent memory.

"Ollie… Ollie, I'm sorry," Tommy implores, red-eyed and pleading as he looks up at his one-time friend. "I don't know… who am I? What did I do? How could I do that? Who does this, Ollie? Who am I?"

Oliver's bow drops to his side, a useless tool in these circumstances. He reaches down, pulls Tommy up and envelopes him in as tight an embrace as Thea had ever had on her brother. Tommy is covered in blood at this point and its slick, red stain transfers to Oliver's skin the moment they touch. But that doesn't seem to matter to Oliver. Then again, maybe it shouldn't. He's had blood on his hands for years. He's used to it by now.

"I know who you are," Oliver tells him in a near-whisper, his voice rough and firm as he holds Tommy tightly to him like he's afraid he might slip straight through his fingers. "I know. I got you, Tommy. It's okay."

Tommy breaks at that, sobbing uncontrollably in Oliver's arms, Thea pressed against his back, resting her cheek against him like she needs to feel his warmth against her skin to remind herself he's really there. They're quite the picture. Quite the family.

And, for the first time in a long time, Laurel can't help but think that things are finally going right.
Chapter 15

There's a riot of feelings living underneath the thin veneer of Tommy's skin. It's like maybe everything he was supposed to feel these last few months or years has come rushing back all at once. It's overwhelming.

He remembers dying, the moment breathing became more effort than he could expend and the world dulled to black. He remembers being reborn, death in reverse, drowning in air and every bit as agonizing.

There is a stark before and after, a fissure splitting his existence in two. Maybe this is another one, a split in the seam on the fabric of his existence. He is not the Tommy of before, the self-deprecating Playboy whose biggest concern was his father's machinations. Except… maybe that still is his biggest concern. Different father these days, though. Not that that's any better. Ra's is every bit as manipulative and terrifying as Malcolm ever was.

He's only dimly aware of everything going on, of the way Thea can't stop touching him and Oliver doesn't stop supporting him. He ends up in a car, somehow. He doesn't know who's driving. He's not even sure who's there. But he's mumbling apologies into a sturdy shoulder that feels like Oliver and he's clinging to a small warm hand that feels like Thea and there's fingers hesitantly carding through his hair that seems like Laurel's and he's home for the first time since he died.

"Not to be a downer, but we don't know he'll stay like this."

It's Sara. Sara who he hasn't seen in nearly a decade, who he hadn't even known was still alive until after he died. Sara whose rebirth was perhaps less literal but no less dramatic.

The hesitant hand in his hair stutters, the little fingers tangled in his grip tighter, the breathing under his cheek hitches.

She's right. They have no way of knowing if he will revert to what Ra's made him or not. He has no way of knowing. He doesn't know who is anymore, but he knows who he doesn't want to be and that's as good a place to start as any.

"I don't want to hurt you. Please don't let me hurt any of you," he near whimpers against Oliver's shoulder.

"I won't let you," Oliver rumbles reassuringly. "I got you, buddy. You're okay."

He's shaking his head before he even thinks about it. He's been trained, conditioned, molded to fight Oliver, to defeat Oliver. Ra's has always known it would come to this. If he was meant to use
to punish Malcolm, it was always going to mean going up against Oliver.

"Can't stop me," he manages. "Just leave me. I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Not an option," Oliver growls.

"How about I knock you out instead?" Thea asks gently, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Tommy turns his face to look at her, his sister, beautiful, sweet Thea who shouldn't be caught up in any of this. But he's missed a lot. These past few years have changed her, remade her the same way they've remade him, albeit less drastically. The world has been unfair to her, unkind, and he hates that he's been a part of that.

"With what?" Oliver asks.

"Honestly, Ollie, did you think I was stupid enough to just charge in with no plan at all?" Thea asks with a raised eyebrow. "I swiped a syringe of ketamine before I left."

"And you were... what? Going to inject Tommy with it and then take on the rest of the League in hand-to-hand combat? Great plan. Nothing could go wrong there," Oliver snaps back at his sister.

"Whatever," Thea says, rolling her eyes. "Like you didn't rush to my defense with no plan at all."

"I had backup. And weapons," Oliver points out.

"I had a weapon, too," Thea says stubbornly.

"One syringe is not a weapon," Oliver argues.

"Not the syringe," Thea counters, shaking her head. "Tommy."

"What?" Tommy questions in confusion.

"Your whole plan banked on getting through to a brainwashed assassin who was sent to torture you and having him defend you instead?" Oliver asks incredulously.

"No," Thea says firmly. "My plan counted on my brother remembering that he's my brother and he doesn't want to hurt me. I'd do the same thing for you. Neither one of you would ever hurt me if you could help it. We knew there was something left of Tommy in there somewhere. I knew I could get through to that. The ketamine was just a backup."

"Use it," Tommy tells her, some note of pleading in his voice. "You might trust me, but... you don't know, Thea. You don't know what they did to me, who I am. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt anyone, but especially not you. Please, just... please just knock me out until you can get me somewhere secure, somewhere I can't hurt anyone."

There's a sobbing noise that he's pretty sure is Laurel and that cracks his heart a little, but he's not wrong. He knows it in his bones. He can't be trusted. Not now.

He feels Oliver nod, but keeps his eyes on Thea, who's looking past him to Oliver's face with grim determination. She slips a syringe out of her sleeve and glances down at it a moment before holding it out to Oliver and squeezing Tommy's fingers.

"Eyes on me, Tommy. Okay?" Thea asks as he nods, focused wholly on her.

The pinch of a needle bites into the skin of his arm as he watches his sister with increasingly heavy
"We're going to take care of you, Tommy," she assures him with certainty. "We love you and we'll keep you safe, remind you who you are, stop the League. The worst of this is over."

As he drifts off to the sound of her voice, he wishes more than anything that he could believe her.

He dreams.

He hasn't dreamed in years. Dreams require hopes or fears, regrets or nostalgia. Al Mobaath had none of those things. Tommy Merlyn has them all in spades.

It's a void at first. All foggy and varying shades of gray. Nothing's in focus. Nothing is right. But it itches at something in the back of his mind, suggests something that sits just out of reach.

There is nothing for immeasurable time, for spans in which the only movement is his heartbeat. But, he thinks… he thinks maybe before there wasn't even that.

Then, something shifts. A breeze drifts across his skin. It smells of ash and death. It should bother him, make him gag and heave.

It doesn't. It's disturbingly comforting.

"Will he be okay?"

Laurel.

Something in him riots at her presence. She doesn't belong here. No one belongs here, but especially not her. She is life and determination and purpose. She is anything but… this.

He turns, set to send her away, but the sight of her is near enough to bring him to his knees. Her lips are red, the first color he's seen in what feels like forever. And it's fitting, maybe, that he sees that first. Her lips have long drawn his attention. But then, suddenly, there's a steel rebar through her middle. Red, red blood spills out as she stands in a few paces away, looking at someone past him, completely unaware that she's impaled and bleeding out in front of him. He wants to scream, correct the world, remind it that this isn't how it happened, that it was him who died in CNRI, not her. But the gray fog absorbs his voice, swallows it in the rank wind.

"I think you need to define 'okay,'" Sara replies in a very qualified tone from behind him.

But when he turns, it's not Sara he sees. It's a corpse in League armor. She has eyes though, deep-sunken blue eyes that look to him with too much understanding.

"He won't be the Tommy you remember. Not after everything he's been through," Sara's corpse continues, her fleshless jaw moving with the words and as she stares at him from behind lidless eyes. "He'll be changed from this."

He looks down at his hand and sees only bones. He flexes his fingers, equal parts fascinated and horrified to watch as the joints bend under his command.
"If anyone can help him, it's us."

Ollie. **Ollie.**

He wants to scream it as panic settles in and he watches bits of flesh on his arm flake off and drift away in the breeze, muscle and sinew following after it like dying leaves in autumn, leaving his bones exposed and bare. But his voice is swallowed by the wind again and he finds he can't move toward his friend.

He can look, though. As much as later he might rather wish he hadn't.

Oliver stands on a pile of bodies, king of the mountain he built with blood and arrows. The face under his boot still twitches, but Oliver doesn't seem to notice.

"I've… I've been where he is. I know what it's like to come back from something like that," Oliver allows.

There's a groan from somewhere and Tommy looks down to find he's on his own pile of bodies. He knows their faces. He knows **all of their faces.** He tries to stumble away, put some distance between himself and the gutted League member under his feet, but he can't.

There are strings on his hands, a marionette with the puppeteer out of sight. He watches as he tries to move his arms, but they don't follow his commands, forearms hanging limply from his elbows.

"You didn't do it alone," a barely-familiar voice points out.

Tommy looks up, pulls his gaze away from the League member whose mouth is spilling blood over his shoes, to see Felicity, Oliver's IT girl turned live-in girlfriend standing near him. She has scissors in one hand and the other outstretched toward Oliver. She's all color and blinding brightness that's almost hard to look at for how out of place it is here.

Oliver doesn't share that problem though. He steps down off the bodies without so much as looking down, takes her hand and smiles. Maybe his color was never truly gray, Tommy isn't sure, but it was dulled to nearly gray at the very least. Not now, though. Not with Felicity there.

It isn't that the color spreads from her. It's that it brightens from within him in her presence. She draws it out like she does a smile. And that amazes Tommy, but he's not sure that he's anything other than gray at this point.

"He won't either," announces a determined voice from very nearby.

Tommy's heart sinks at the voice. She can't be here. He won't allow it. It violates every single bit of his being for her to be here. But he looks to his left.

And she is.

Thea. Thea who was his sister before he had any clue of the blood connection between them, before Ra's so callously informed him of Moira Queen's indiscretions and the need to eliminate Malcolm Merlyn's bloodline. He has loved this girl like she's his own blood since the moment she had been born and Oliver had said "It's amazing, Tommy. She's perfect."

"You have to go," he tells her, but she makes no sign she can hear him.

"Thea, it's not safe! You need to leave!" he cries as the wind steals his voice.
She smiles at him, touches the side of his face and he whimpers at the gentleness of her touch. It has been many, many decades since he knew gentleness. Since his mother's hand had soothed him to sleep, since his father's smile was more kind than calculating.

"We can help him," Thea says as Tommy watches in horror while spiders crawl from her mouth. He tries to move away, tries to grab her hand, but his body doesn't follow his commands. Not with the strings on them. His hand raises against his will, bony fingers flexing as they reach for the slim column of Thea's neck. One by one the fingers curl around her neck, no trace of gentleness in their touch.

He screams, tries everything he can think of to move away, but the strings that control him force his fingers to clench, to bite into her windpipe with ever-increasing force.

"He'll be safe with us," she says with a smile as the color leaches from her face.

Tommy can do nothing but cry a wordless scream.

"Tommy. Tommy! Ollie, he's going to hurt himself!"

It's Thea, but her lips aren't moving. Everything slides away in front of him, people dissolving into the distant gray fog. He blinks and struggles to move his unresponsive limbs. He can see that they aren't moving, in spite of his commands, but he can feel them hit things.

Suddenly, when he blinks he's not in the gray anymore. He's in the car with Thea's hands gently holding his face and Oliver restraining his arms.

"You're safe, Tommy. It's okay," Thea is telling him, her eyes fixed on his. "You were having a dream. We've got you. You're safe."

You're not, he wants to tell her, but he can't catch his breath.

"Tommy?" Sara's voice calls from the front seat.

He looks toward her and finds she's eyeing him with distrust and a gun in her hand.

He's so grateful for that that it's almost absurd. But for all of Thea's instant acceptance of him and Oliver's obvious want to save him, he needs to know that someone trusts him as little as he trusts himself.

It's probably the relief on his face at the sight of the weapon that prompts Sara to relax slightly, convinced - for the moment - that he's not an active threat.

"Sara!" Laurel protests with such a familiar, indignant tone that it almost makes Tommy smile.

"You, better than anyone, know what he's capable of, Laurel," Sara reminds her sister. "I'm not going to risk all of our lives for sentimentality."

"This is Tommy," Laurel argues.

"Sometimes," Oliver counters, sounding like the word pains him.

"Ollie!" Thea protests, one of her hands falling away from Tommy's face.

He wants it back. That warmth and affection, that humanity has been absent from his life for so long. But the dream stays with him. He can't help but picture the color fading from her as he steals that
"It's okay," Tommy says, gently pulling Thea's other hand away from his face. "Better safe than sorry, right? Not something I ever adhered to, obviously, but I hear that's the sensible route. Where are we, anyhow?"

The car's stopped and it seems as easy a change of topic as any. He'll take it.

"Somewhere safe," Roy responds from the driver's seat in what has to be the most vague answer ever.

"It's an ARGUS safehouse," Thea tells him. "We're in the middle of a big chunk of property owned by the forest service. Lyla says the house isn't even in the county records."

"Lyla?" he asks.

"John's wife," Oliver supplies.

"Oh man, is he…?" Tommy starts.

"We think he'll be fine," Oliver replies with some effort. "We're keeping an eye on him."

"Good," Tommy nods in relief. "That's good."

"They're already here," Roy points out, nodding his head toward another car pulled off to the side of the gravel road.

"Who is 'they'?" Tommy asks warily.

"Everyone," Oliver replies. "John, Lyla, Felicity, Connor, Sandra… I need everyone where I can protect them while we deal with Ra's. I'm not letting any of you out of my sight."

"That's… a terrible idea, Ollie," Tommy tells him blankly. "One of your worst and considering our history that's saying a lot."

"That's what I said," Sara agrees.

"Lock me up. Get everyone you care about as far away from me as you can. Get them out of Starling," Tommy advises.

"I just got you back, Tommy!" Oliver snaps at him. "I'm not deserting you now."

"You can't trust me. I don't trust me," he tells him. "If you knew the things I was going to do… to your son, to Thea... I don't want to be that person. Please, get them away from me."

"We won't let you hurt them," Oliver tells him, as if it's that easy.

"Oliver…" Tommy says with a dry laugh that entirely lacks humor.

"We're not just going to give you run of the house. There are… holding cells," Oliver acknowledges. "For now, you'll stay in one."

"What kind of safehouse did you say this was again?" Tommy asks.

"ARGUS," Thea tells him.
"Never heard of it," Tommy replies.

"That'd be the point of ARGUS," Roy responds.


"And sort of secret," Sara adds.

"It suits our purposes for now," Oliver notes, opening the door to the car and easing out before turning back to him. "We can handle this, Tommy. I promise."

Tommy watches Oliver's outstretched hand for a moment. Hope is terrifying. He'd forgotten that. He hasn't felt it in so long. But he wants Oliver to be right. He wants it so much. And he's always believed in Oliver. That, apparently, has never changed.

Slowly, he reaches out and takes Oliver's hand.

Locking Tommy up two cells down from his father is harder than Oliver would have thought it to be. But, it's the relief on Tommy's face at being contained that really gets to him. It's like a punch to the gut.

Tommy doesn't belong here. He belongs behind a bar serving drinks with a wink or grinning as he spins some beautiful girl around the dance floor or laughing with the top down on his convertible. He belongs anywhere but here. Oliver would never have wanted this for Tommy. Not ever. But he's selfishly grateful that his friend is back. Or, at least, that some version of him is.

It's harder still on Thea. He forgets, sometimes, that she's scarcely out of her teens, that she's a girl who lost nearly all of her family, that even though she didn't spend years on a deserted island, she lived in her own kind of purgatory.

She'd wanted to stay in Tommy's cell with him. Of course she had. Stubborn, beautifully loyal Thea. If Oliver hadn't already been convinced that Tommy was more-or-less himself and not Al Mobaath, the sheer look of terror on the other man's face would have convinced him on the spot. Even with his protests, it had taken Laurel siding with Oliver and Tommy, holding up her own bloodied wrists to make a point, to talk Thea out of it.

But she had talked her out of it. And a heavy look between Oliver and Roy had clearly established that the younger man would not be letting Thea out of his sight for the foreseeable future. The logistics of this are something Oliver actively chooses not to think about.

Thankfully, he'd had other things that needed his attention. Doesn't he always?

Sergei and his men hadn't seemed particularly thrilled at the idea of playing jailkeeper for the Merlyns, but they'd been wise enough not to voice their distaste. And, besides, as Bratva orders go, redrugging a sociopathic mass murderer every few hours and making sure both he and his son stay locked up where they can't hurt anyone is a walk in the park. But Oliver is well aware that inaction does not sit well with Sergei or his men. This isn't a long-term solution. But it's a damned good short-
Now, with it well after midnight and the crises of the day as well-managed as they possibly can be for the moment, Oliver finds himself wandering toward the room he knows Felicity's has deemed theirs. But he's not at ease, nowhere near calm. The last two days have been a series of one life-or-death situation after another and a large part of him is watching for an attack from the shadows. The chance to rest seems, frankly, too good to be true. Neither his mind nor is body is prepared for it.

"How's Digg?" Oliver calls out as he closes the bedroom door behind him, hearing the faucet running in their en suite bathroom.

"Still asleep," she calls back, but she's apparently brushing her teeth because it sounds more like 'ill a heap' than anything else.

"I should go check on him," Oliver says, mostly to himself.

"I wouldn't," Felicity responds more clearly, shutting off the water. "Lyla's with him, hopefully finally getting some sleep."

"He hasn't woken up at all yet?" Oliver asks with concern, already wondering if this is their next crisis, if Digg is worse off than they thought.

"No, he did. Briefly," she replies. "He was pretty out of it, though. Sandra gave him some more painkillers, which knocked him out again. She says he's looking pretty good so far, for a guy who took an arrow to his stomach. She says his muscle tissue being so thick might have saved his life, which is kind of funny because I've always said you guys have killer abs, but I suppose it's actually the exact opposite."

In spite of the situation, in spite of the sense of foreboding that still hangs over him and leaves him tense, ready for impending battle, he huffs a laugh and shakes his head. She's always had this effect on him, even before they were. It's one of the many reasons he loves her so very much. She can cut through the harshness of life effortlessly, unintentionally, bring him laughter and amusement when it seems like no one should be able to.

"Have you seen Sara and Nyssa?" he asks. "We should work out some kind of patrol schedule."

"They're asleep," she responds. "Like we should be."

Her voice is much closer than before, unmuffled by the bathroom door, and he turns to find her in one of his shirts with bare legs that draw his attention instantly. He sees her like this all the time, sees her in less than this all the time, but it is always distracting, always enticing, and if he makes a strangled little noise of approval in the back of his throat, he feels like that's fully understandable under the circumstances.

"We don't have time for sleep," he tells her, dragging his eyes from her legs by sheer force of will.

"We don't have time not to sleep," she corrects him.

"The League will retaliate," he points out.

"Yes, they will," she agrees, walking over to him and taking his hand in hers. "But not tonight."

"You can't know that," he argues.

"Oliver…" she sighs, chewing her lip. "I get that you're terrified. You have every right to be. You're
a protector by nature and everyone you care about is in danger, all of us are looking to you to help keep us safe. But you're only human and you need sleep. The League didn't expect to lose Al Mobaath tonight and you guys put a real dent in their numbers in Starling. So, yes, they will strike back. But not tonight. Tonight, we all need to rest, so we can be ready for whatever happens tomorrow."

"I just… I need to make sure we're secure," he replies tensely, feeling ill-at-ease.

"If you think the first thing I did once we got here wasn't double and triple checking our security systems, you need sleep more than I thought," she responds. "ARGUS had a pretty good set-up to start with. I didn't even have to do much. We've got floodlights linked to a motion sensor. Patrolling the grounds would literally do more harm than good."

She's right. It should put him more at ease. It should, but it doesn't.

He's in survival mode right now, defensive, battle-ready. It feels like the island all over again, when he slept with one eye open and a weapon in hand. Only this time… this time there's Thea and Connor and Felicity and Tommy and an injured Digg and that's so much worse. He's exhausted. He's exhausted, but the adrenaline surging through his veins is so strong it leaves him almost feeling jittery.

"You aren't going to be able to sleep… are you?" Felicity asks, sizing up the situation correctly.

"I'd built up all these worst-case scenarios, you know?" he asks her, sighing and stretching his neck as he talks. "The League would have more people or Thea would be badly hurt or I'd have to fight Tommy. I was ready for it. Or, as ready as I could be. And then… none of that happened."

"So you're still waiting for it to happen," she surmises.

"Yeah. Maybe," he allows.

"Well… the way I see it, there's two ways to go about getting past that," she tells him, her free hand wrapping around the back of his neck and kneading the exceedingly tense muscles there. "You could go find the gym in this place and hit a punching bag until you're too exhausted to stand or…"

"Or?" he asks after it's obvious that she's not about to finish her thought.

"Yeah… or," she replies suggestively. And… hell yes. His instincts shift from survival to something else exceedingly primal on a dime. The air goes heavy and he can practically feel his pupils dilate as his attention hones in solely on her.

"Or," he responds thickly. "Definitely 'or.'"

"Yeah?" she asks, her voice a little teasing as he moves forward, crowding her to the point where she actually has to take a step back.

"Yes," he replies firmly, leaning down to kiss her with purpose even as his hands curl around the backs of her bare thighs and hoist her up.

Her legs wrap around his waist easily, her lips part against his and he drinks her in with equal parts need and want. There is a rightness he finds when he's with her that he's never encountered anywhere else. She understands him like no one else ever has. And he needs that right now, needs her in a way he hadn't even realized until she'd said the word 'or.'
Slim fingers tighten in the hair at the nape of his neck and his hands slide up to palm her ass as he walks her backwards. And fuck she's not even wearing underwear, he realizes with a groan when his fingers find more skin.

Like he needed more encouragement?

They collide, intentionally if he's being honest, with the dresser and he holds her up with one hand while he shoves a lamp and a cheap alarm clock off the furniture with a resounding crash. Her hand reaches behind her for stability as he sets her down atop it and drags her right to the edge, standing between her thighs.

"Oliver, there's a bed right over there," she says with a laugh that gives way to a gasp as his teeth find the curve of her collarbone.

"Yes there is," he agrees easily as he nibbles against the juncture of her neck and shoulder, completely undeterred from his current objective.

"Oliver, that's… oh," she shudders as he finds that spot on her neck and sucks.

He knows all the spots that make her quake and shiver by now and he is more than happy to use every single one of them to reduce her to a writhing, beautiful mess at the moment.

"Oh God, Oliver," she moans throatily as his fingers tease up the back of one of her calves to the soft underside of her knee.

Her fingers tangle further in his hair and her grip tightens like she's trying to keep his mouth exactly where it is. His teeth scrape against her skin before sucking on it again and she flat-out whimpers, her body quivering as goosebumps break out across her skin and her nipples pebble up underneath the thin fabric of his crisp, white button-down shirt. Delight and triumph pound in his veins. There is nothing, nothing that he enjoys more than drawing these reactions out of her.

There's a tug on his shirt and he's so focused that it takes him a moment to realize that one of her hands had left her hair and she's doing her level-best to pull his henley off with one hand. Out of necessity and the bone-deep desire to bury himself inside her at some point in the very near future, he pulls back and hurriedly rids himself of the shirt.

He takes a moment to look at her before diving back in. She's gorgeous and mussed and can't possibly begin to understand what seeing her here like this in just his dress shirt does to him.

His lips find hers again, each of them demanding and intense, a little rougher and needier than usual, but then maybe that's to be expected after the day they've had. There's so much adrenaline in him, he's so keyed up at this point that his hands are shaking as he circles one finger around her still-clothed, peaked nipple and tugs her so that her naked sex is pressed firmly against his groin.

She groans, tilting her head back to thud against the wall as she pushes her chest up, granting him better access. Whatever thin patience he'd had evaporates at the sight of her so eager and wanton. He tugs at the shirt, the top three buttons slipping their fastenings easily, but the fourth button flying somewhere across the room. He doesn't care. At all. He can buy more shirts. Hell, he'll buy a goddamned shirt factory if it means he can tear them off of her like this on a regular basis.

She moves to shrug the shirt off of her shoulders, but it only slides down one, leaving her left breast fully exposed. His fingers grip the other side of the shirt, holding it up and he meets her questioning gaze with intensity.

"Leave it," he says gruffly.
Her mouth forms a little 'o' shape in surprise and it might be adorable under other circumstances but right now it's just fueling his carnal thoughts even more.

"Yeah?" she asks, somewhat breathlessly.

"Yes," he responds in a near-growl.

He keeps his eyes fixed on hers as he lowers his mouth to her exposed breast, nosing the shirt out of the way before fixing his lips around her nipple and sucking on it with sudden firmness. She tries to hold his gaze. He knows she does. But they are practiced lovers at this point. He knows how to make her go slack-jawed and her eyes flutter shut against her will. And, soon enough, she's got her head thudded back against the wall as she whimpers again.

His hands wrap around her waist, practically spanning the whole of it, as he savors the texture of her nipple, his tongue sliding across it with steady pressure. Almost unconsciously, his hips rock into hers, his rigid, clothed cock pressing urgently against her clit. She's so fucking wet that he can feel it even through his slacks. Her scent is filling the air, making his heart race and his mouth water.

One of her hands slides between them and he jumps involuntarily as her nails rake against the seam of his pants.

"Oh fuck, Felicity," he groans, his forehead pressed to her chest.

He looks down to watch as she palms him through his pants, her fingers alternately providing pressure and scraping along the bulge of his dick with her nails.

"That is the general idea," she replies.

He can hear the smirk in her voice. Something in her tone makes him lift his head to look her in the eye. There's a challenge there. She's trouble and he fucking loves it. She raises an eyebrow at him as she slides her hand into his pants and wraps her fingers around his cock.

His hips jerk as she pumps him lightly, teasingly. She's playing with fire right now and from the look on her face, she knows it. He's not in a teasing mood, but every little thing she's doing make him want to hear her scream his name and thrash against him all the more.

Somewhere in her teasing she's undone the fastening for his pants and he takes advantage of that to tug off his slacks and boxer-briefs and kick them away. With one last teasing trail of her finger, she lets go of his cock and braces her hands behind her instead, her eyes alight with anticipation as he curls his hands around the backs of her knees to get them into just the right position.

The dresser, as it turns out, is at the perfect height.

She's slick, positively needy with her wetness, and with a slight dip of his knees he aligns his cock right with her entrance and pushes in. The angle has him deeper than usual and manages to hit that spot that always gets her to break apart quickly and violently. She chokes on a breath and whimpers his name as her head thuds back against the wall again.

"Yes," she hisses out as he drives into her again and again.

He's supporting her as much as the dresser is. She's leaning against her hands but he's got one arm banded around her waist, propping her up a bit, giving him one hell of a view as his cock buries itself inside her. Every goddamned thing about her is fucking gorgeous right now. Her breasts are bouncing with every thrust, her head is thrown back as she gasps for air, those entrancing legs of hers are wrapped around him like a vise. He's pretty sure he could come from the sight alone.
But first, he's pretty determined to make her fall apart. More than once, if he has anything to say about it.

The first time is easy. She was close even before he got his pants off. All it takes is a filthy, wet kiss and a grind on the end of his thrusts a few times before her eyes roll back and she comes with a sharp cry and a frantic bouncing of her hips against his.

He keeps thrusting, more gently until her breathing slows back down and the flush works its way out of her skin. There's something lazy and satisfied in her smile as she comes back to herself, but he is nowhere near done with her yet.

"You're breathtaking like that," he tells her, tangling his fingers in her wild hair and tilting her head to the side to expose the long column of her neck.

"Oh," she sighs languidly as he works his lips along the slender line of her throat.

It's a little possessive, maybe. A little more alpha-male than usual. But then this isn't slow, worshipful love-making on a lazy sunday morning. This is a different kind of expression, a different kind of passion, and there's room in their lives for both.

"I want to watch you do it again," he growls against her throat, releasing her hair and reaching down to brush against her clit with his thumb.

"Oh god," she cries out. "Oh god, Oliver."

"I love when you're loud," he tells her encouragingly, rubbing firm little circles over her clit with his thumb and he drives into her harder. "Bet I can get you even louder."

She's past conscious words at this point, but she bites her lip like she's trying to keep the noises in and he views that as a challenge.

He's close. Seeing her like this, watching her break, getting her close to that point again already, it's absolutely hitting him on all the right levels. There's a tingling heat curling at the base of his spine and his balls are tightening up with his impending release, but he refuses to let that happen before he watches her fall apart again.

He nuzzles against the soft skin of her neck, letting his scruff scrape against it before soothing over the flesh with his tongue. Then, he sucks against her neck and pinches her clit between his fingers and she's tumbling over the edge again.

"Oh god! Oh yes, yes, Oliver!" she cries out desperately as she bounces on his cock. "Right there. Don't stop. Don't stop. Oh fuck!"

His orgasm takes him violently an instant later. It's all too much, the clench of her walls around him as her heels dig into his ass and her small breasts bounce beautifully right in front of him. He loses himself in her, empties himself inside her and the world narrows down to him and her for a few long, euphoric moments.

"Oh my god," she moans in a blissed-out voice as she reclines bonelessly against the dresser and the wall. "Holy shit, you should come home without finding a fight more often."

He can't help but chuckle at that and press a soft kiss against her lips. It amazes him sometimes, how much he loves her, how much he wants this every day for the rest of his life.

But now isn't the time for thoughts of forever. Now's the time for thoughts of the next hour, the rest
of the evening, the immediate future. And, quite frankly, Oliver's wants for the immediate future are the same they were fifteen minutes ago. He's still amped up, still nowhere near sleep, and he's wondering how many times tonight he can make her scream his name.

"Ready for sleep?" she asks, running her fingers along the side of his face with obvious affection that he can't help but lean into.

"Ready for bed," he corrects her, surprising her by lifting her from the dresser and walking them toward the mattress with his mostly-softened cock still inside her. "But I'm nowhere near ready for sleep."

As jail cells go, this one is probably one of the better ones that Tommy Merlyn has stayed in.

For a while there, he and Ollie had joked they ought to get a plaque with their names on it on one of the holding cells in the SCPD. That one had been grimey. He can remember, half-jokingly and completely drunkenly, suggesting that they ought to sponsor it, donate some money for upgrades.

LA had been worse. And crowded. Of course, some of his sour opinion about it might have been the circumstances. How had he been supposed to know the girl was a hooker? It wasn't like he'd paid her.

And then… then there had been Nanda Parbat. He chooses, very deliberately, not to think about that. It's too much, too soon. He can't process anything about that place because he can't come to terms with how it changed him. He's not sure he ever will.

This place, though… at least here he's safe, alone. He's got a bed. It's somewhat utilitarian but a big step up from the stone floor he'd most often slept on back in Nanda Parbat.

This is better.

This is good.

He can almost relax here, let down his guard. Almost.

There's men outside his cell, guarding him, guarding people from him, some combination of the two. They speak in low tones, their voices sharp and foreign. Russian, his brain supplies. They're Russian.

Because Oliver is part of the Bratva. Tommy Merlyn hadn't known that. Al Mobaath had.

He wishes he didn't now. He'd rather have nothing left of Al Mobaath that lives in his skin.

"It is time," he hears one of the men say and something chills suddenly in his veins at the words.

As tired as he is, he's instantly fully alert, instead of lingering in that drowsy place that's half-awake and half in dreams. He sits up on his cot and watches the door with great trepidation. But the men on the other side of the glass pay him no attention at all. They walk out of sight and Tommy strains to hear what's going on.

There's the shuffling of feet, words too muffled to make out and the buzz of an alarm being disabled. His heart thunders in his throat as he puts the pieces together and a picture starts to form. He hopes
he's wrong. Oh, man, does he hope he's wrong.

He's not.

Seconds later, the window of his cell is filled with the form of his father, flanked by the Russians.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asks Sergei. "Oliver told you-"

"Oliyer can Поцелуй мою жопу!" Sergei says, spitting on the ground and grinding it in with the heel of his boot. "I do not take orders from him."

"But you take orders from my father?" Tommy asks in disbelief.

"Tommy… you aren't seeing the big picture," Malcolm tells him with a smile that looks disturbingly kind. "It is… so good to see you, son. You cannot begin to imagine how proud I am of you, of the man you've become."

Tommy actually steps back in horror at that, nauseated at the very idea.

"I'm a murderer, an assassin and a puppet who spent years unable to think for himself," Tommy says. "And you're proud of that?"

"You're a survivor, Tommy," Malcolm tells him, nodding. "Like me. Like your sister. You were weak once, but not now. Now you're strong. And it makes me so proud to call you my son."

There have been many times in Tommy's life when he thought he couldn't hate his father more than he already did. Turns out, all of those times, he'd been wrong.

"I was born from the waters of the Lazarus Pit," he tells him. "I have no father. And before this is through, we'll see which one of us is the survivor."

"Yes," Malcolm says with a somewhat bone-chilling smile. "I suspect we will."

"We must go," Sergei speaks up, checking his watch. "Oliver's сука is busy at the moment, but the minute she looks, she will know the security has been tampered with."

"Is good thing the капитан has the stamina of wild boar, keeps his woman on her back long time," says one of the other Bratva men with a crude laugh.

"It would probably be in your best interests to never make a comment about Miss Smoak again," Malcolm advises the men with scarcely a glance.

Tommy says nothing, preferring greatly not to speculate in the least on Oliver's sex life these days, but his eyes are fixed on his father who grins back with entirely too much calm.

"Until next time, son," Malcolm says with a nod.

A moment later, the only one left is Tommy, shouting for anyone who might hear that his father is free. But there's no one around to hear him.
Chapter 16

It's the quiet snick of the door shutting that finally wakes Oliver up, but it's also the latest he can remember having slept in for years. There's a steady stream of sunlight pouring through the window, edging it's way in an easy crawl across the bed, leaving it warm and all the more comfortable. Part of him wishes Felicity were still curled up next to him, wants to wrap his arms around her, pull her close and drift back to dreams with her in his arms. But she's just left the room. She woke up before him - a first for sure - and there's entirely too much demanding their attention today to spend the late morning lazing in bed anyhow.

A point which is suddenly and annoyingly punctuated by the incessant vibration of his phone.

He barely glances at it, wincing as Pamela's name shows on the screen before he takes the call.

"Morning, Pamela," he says, yawning on her name so deeply that his jaw clicks with an audible pop.

"Oh good. You aren't dead," Pamela says in place of a greeting in her typically terse tone. "I won't have to release your obituary after all."

"You… wrote me an obituary?" Oliver asks, blinking as the words process through his mind at a delayed pace, held up by the remnants of sleep still clinging to him to the edges of his consciousness.

"Of course I did. I've had one for years," Pamela huffs as if he's being ridiculous. "What kind of media rep wouldn't have an obituary for you in their back pocket? How many times have you been in a 'motorcycle accident' in the last three years? I lost count sometime last October."

She has a point, but he's still hung up on the notion of her actually having a press release about his death on hand for 'just in case.'

"But nevermind that," Pamela instructs. "How's Connor?"

"Fine," Oliver replies with a sigh, grateful that even for all of Pamela's business-like nature, she hasn't lost sight of the fact that he suddenly has a son who has been in tremendous danger of late. "It was a long night."

"So I gathered when I didn't get a call from you after your apartment more or less blew up," Pamela responds sharply.

"Pamela… I know I should have called you. I'm sure you've had your hands full. The press has to be going crazy," Oliver tells her, stretching his neck as he sits up.

"I… am sure that you were indisposed," Pamela says carefully, sidestepping the Arrow issue as usual. "Let me worry about the press. You have enough to deal with."

The press is, quite literally, Oliver's last concern at the moment. Queen Consolidated itself is pretty far down the list, really. But these things are Pamela's primary focus. They always are. And he's grateful for that.

"Thank you," he says, meaning it fully.

"Of course," Pamela responds, brushing off his thanks. "But, Oliver, the press has connected the dots between you and Connor. I got in front of it as best as I could, spun it in our favor, but it's gonna be a damn long while before you and your boy don't have reporters trying to track you down."

Oliver sighs as he pulls on a shirt and stands, pacing in the sunbeam painting the floor in a deceptively cheery yellow hue.

"What do they have?" he asks finally.

"You have a son you didn't even know about, thanks to the philandering of your less reputable days," Pamela tells him. "You only found out about his existence when he was kidnapped for ransom. Your own private security team managed to rescue him, which culminated in the fight in the lobby when the kidnappers pursued him. You bravely fought off the kidnappers in defense of your son and the company and you have since taken a brief leave of absence while you and Felicity focus on your family along with your son and his mother. As the kidnappers escalated to murder in their attack on QC and have not yet been caught and brought to justice, there is significant concern that they may attempt to take Connor again. QC is closed for the time being, in an effort to aid the police in their investigation. On the advice of your security team and the police, you are unavailable for comment except through me or your legal team until this is resolved."

"That's... good," Oliver says.

"No need to sound so surprised," Pamela drawls.

"No, I just mean, it's very close to true," Oliver clarifies. "That's good."

"Of course it's close to true," Pamela huffs. "The truth is significantly easier to keep track of than lies. I spin the truth. I don't invent it.

"The second attempt at taking Connor in your apartment also hit the press," she continues. "It's boosted public opinion in your favor... strongly. That you refused to cave to ransom demands and defended your son against kidnappers twice makes you look strong, capable and family-oriented. I've honestly never seen press this much in the Queen family favor. Public opinion is sky-high and that video of your swordfight in the lobby is as viral as anything I've seen in a long time. The puns are killing me, though. 'Royal family under attack?' 'Queen princeling finds knight in newfound father?' 'An heir to the throne?' It's ridiculous."

"It always has been," Oliver says absently.

"It really has," she agrees readily. "Look... Oliver..."

She hesitates before she continues. That's... sort of chilling, really. Pamela's the type to barrel through a conversation. Hesitation is not characteristic of her. At all.

"What?" Oliver asks gruffly, stopping mid-pace as he waits for her to continue.

"I don't know what kind of conversation you've had with Sandra or how you feel about her. I imagine that's a complicated issue," Pamela says, tip-toeing her way through the conversation. "But she cannot possibly be prepared for the scrutiny the media will put her through. They will dig through every aspect of her life. They will slut-shame her for having your child, call her a gold-digger for taking your mother's money and vilify her for keeping Connor's existence from you. You will come out of this looking like a hero for saving your son and protecting him. The public is extremely sympathetic to you. That's not going to happen for her."

It's fair that Pamela doesn't know how Oliver feels about Sandra. It's hard enough for him to sort through on his own. On one hand, she kept his son's existence a secret from him, told him that his son died before he was born and robbed them of years together. Oliver might be able to see why she did that - they were young, she was desperate, he was far from responsible or reliable - but he also
won't ever fully forgive her for it. On the other hand, she bore his child on her own, raised him by herself, loved him, nurtured him, protected him. Oliver can't help but be grateful to her for that.

"I'll talk to her," he says as the truth of Pamela's words weigh down on him. "And… Pamela I know it's not your job, but…"

"You want me to manage her with the press, too," Pamela finishes for him.

"I have my problems with her, with what she's done," Oliver acknowledges. "But those are private. I don't want her dragged through the press. It's not their business and it's not good for Connor."

"All right," Pamela agrees.

"Really?" Oliver asks, a little surprised she's consented so readily.

"I've done far worse for your family than manage an ex-mistress' reputation," Pamela reminds him as Oliver winces at her words. "And I bear some responsibility for this mess, so I feel obligated to help out. But more than that, I don't like knowing what the press will do to her. The punishment doesn't fit the crime. Have her call me. I need to have a very intrusive conversation with her."

"How intrusive?" Oliver asks.

"Thoroughly," Pamela replies glibly. "If she smoked a joint in high school, I need to know. If she slept with a professor in college, I need to know. If she made an offhanded comment about you to her favorite barista four years ago, I need to know. I need to dig into every aspect of her life, before the press does."

"Pamela, that's…" Oliver winces.

"Necessary," Pamela asserts, her voice hard and certain. "If you want me to do this, I need to do it right. I refuse to half-ass this."

"She's not a celebrity. She's just a mom and a nurse," Oliver contests.

"Oliver, you know better than that," Pamela chastises. "She became a celebrity the moment she decided to give birth to your son. She just didn't know it yet. And you know what that means. You know how that goes. The public feels like they own every part of you, like they can cast judgement on you, criticize you for everything you've done, everything you are. They're going to tear her to bits."

There's nothing Oliver can say to that. Because she's right. She's right and he knows it. He's seen it his whole life. He remembers his mother hiring a personal trainer immediately after Thea was born when the press questioned how long she'd keep on the baby weight. He remembers when Thea's clothing choices started being dictated by what would get her on the positive side of the style pages. He remembers when his father quietly bailed him out of jail again and again instead of showing up himself and giving the media the photo they wanted. He knows. He's lived it his whole life.

"I'll have her call you," he says simply.

"Good," Pamela says crisply. "Anything else I need to know?"

There is. He's hesitant to bring it up, but he knows he needs to, that Pamela is an ally whose importance cannot be overstated in the sort of wars that she fights.

"You might hear something about Tommy," Oliver allows.
"Tommy?" Pamela asks.

"Yes," Oliver breathes.

"Tommy Merlyn?" Pamela qualifies, skepticism heavy in her voice.

"Yeah," Oliver agrees.

"That he knew about Connor or something to do with Sandra?" Pamela ventures.

"That he's alive," Oliver corrects.

There's a whole lot of silence on the line after that. Enough that Oliver starts to wonder if Pamela's still there.

"Pamela?" he asks.

"I'm here," Pamela says, dragging her words out like she's buying herself time to think. "Oliver… Tommy died."

"I know," Oliver tells her.

"I was at his funeral," Pamela continues.

"I know," Oliver says again.

"What makes you think-"

"He's two floors down from me right now," Oliver interrupts. "Just as alive as you or me."

"That's… not possible," Pamela says. "Oliver, you've had a really rough couple of days. Maybe-"

"He was near death, kidnapped, nursed back to health and brainwashed by a group of assassins that his father used to belong to," Oliver says, interrupting her again.

"Oliver…" disbelief reeks from her tone.

"I could explain more fully, but I'd be telling you a whole lot that I know you'd rather not know about," Oliver tells her levelly. "I'm not crazy, Pamela. And I'm not wrong. Tommy's alive. He's had a really rough time the last few years. He hasn't been himself. Literally. We're working with him. Thea and Laurel can both connect with him on some level. We're helping him. But sooner or later, someone is going to see him and put two and two together."

"You know, we'd gotten to the point in our professional relationship where I'd believed there was genuinely nothing you could say to surprise me," Pamela tells him. "Looks like I was wrong."

"Pamela," he says with a short laugh. "You have no idea."

"That is not even a little reassuring," she says dryly.

"Maybe not, but it's honest," he tells her.

"You make retirement look good, Oliver," Pamela warns.

"I don't believe that for a second," he responds immediately.

"You're right, damn it," she sighs. "I love this shit. On that note, I've got to return a call from channel
52 and tell Debbie absolutely nothing. It's going to make my day. So, I'm gonna let you go. But have Sandra call me as soon as she can and you call me if there's anything else I need to know. Got it?"

"Of course," Oliver agrees readily.

"And Oliver?" Pamela says. "Try to spread out your crises a bit. We've already locked down this news cycle. It wouldn't hurt to hang on to any of this with a positive spin for later."

"I'll try my best to space out my personal life-changing events for your benefit in the future," Oliver dead-panns.

"That's all I ask," she says, hanging up without so much as a goodbye.

Pamela has her own battles to fight, ones fought with words to win over the hearts and minds of the public, the stockholders, the board. He doesn't really understand those. He never has. Oliver's battles are far considerably more literal. He's more than content to leave the war of words in Pamela's capable hands. He has enough to deal with.

A quick perusal of the dresser drawers proves they're as well stocked as they are sturdy. Say what you might about ARGUS, but their preparation level could not be faulted by anyone. There are nondescript outfits for both men and women in virtually every size.

He grabs a gray shirt and a pair of jeans, pulling both on as he thinks through the day ahead. Luckily, the outfit is a good approximation of fitting because he's got way too much on his plate at the moment to worry about finding clothing. Tommy needs help - maybe more than they can give him. Connor needs protection. Ra's needs to be defeated. Anatoly will be in town sometime today. Digg is still hurt. There's a lot to deal with. But first… first he needs to find a bite to eat. He can't honestly remember his last meal. Was it lunch? Yesterday? Just before Sandra showed up and Tommy destroyed his home? He thinks it might have been, but he's not actually sure.

The house is huge. The more he thinks about it, the more he suspects this is a massive backup location for ARGUS in case of a cataclysmic attack. There are cells, an armory, a dozen bedrooms fully stocked with clothes meant to help people blend in. This isn't just a safehouse. This is more than that. And he's pretty sure that Lyla would be in more than a little bit of trouble if Waller found out she'd exposed it to someone outside of the agency.

He follows the sound of voices as he leaves his room, padding down the hall in bare feet toward what he presumes is the kitchen. His assumption proves correct before he even enters the room. He can smell the bitter aroma of bad coffee and hear the sizzle of something cooking.

"Well good morning, sunshine!" Sara says with faux-demure sweetness from her perch atop the counter as she munches on what appears to be dried fruit.

"Morning," Oliver says, doing a double take at the image of Nyssa flipping hash browns on the stovetop.

"I presume you slept well," she grins cheekily as Felicity groans with her forehead pressed against the tabletop.

He can see her blushing even with her face mostly obscured. He's not exactly sure why yet, though.

"This place is pretty great. Comfy beds, nice shower. Know what it's not?" Sara asks, charming grin firmly in place as she blinks her eyes sweetly at Oliver.

Felicity mumbles something into the table, turning even redder, and suddenly everything clicks for
"Soundproof?" he guesses, wincing a little at he looks back at Sara.

"Got it in one, ladies and gentlemen," she chirps, hopping down from the counter and patting Oliver on the shoulder. "I know you're used to having a whole floor to yourself, Ollie. But, do us all a favor and remember you two have got neighbors while we're here. K?"

He clears his throat and tilts his head in agreement, having the grace to feel at least a little bit apologetic - no one wants to spend the night hearing their ex-boyfriend have sex in the next room. At least it was Sara and not Laurel. Or worse, Sandra and Connor.

"Sorry," he says, mostly meaning it, before walking over to Felicity and kissing the top of her head which still rests on the table in front of her.

"I fail to understand," Nyssa says, voice sharp and crisp.

Oliver looks to her in surprise to find her staring back with some mixture of wary suspicion and distaste. Sara actually chokes on a sip of her coffee at her girlfriend's words.

"Your beloved seemed… most pleased," Nyssa allows. "Repeatedly."

"And this *confuses* you?" Oliver asks with a short laugh.

"*Oh my god,*" Felicity says into the table.

"Admittedly, I had given little thought to your prowess as I do not find you attractive in the least," Nyssa states plainly to Oliver's vast amusement. "Obviously your stamina is great, given your propensity for physical activity. And yet, I find I am much thrown by your apparent focus on your beloved. She was most… vocal. I would not have assumed you to be of such a giving nature."

"I *could* clarify your misconception in great detail, Nyssa, but I'm guessing everyone in the room would really prefer that I not," Sara says with entirely too much delight.

"*Oh my god,* can this conversation please die a sudden and permanent death?" Felicity asks, looking up from the table with pleading eyes.

Nyssa still looks like possibly she's trying to make sense of things or maybe like she smells something off-putting and Sara seems more amused than is really warranted, but - mercifully - Sandra and Connor wander into the kitchen, bringing Felicity an obvious sense of relief as the somewhat-mortifying conversation is brought to an abrupt halt.

"Hey, sprog," Sara greets, grinning at the kid as he gives her a strange look in return. "We're making breakfast. What'll it be? I warn you now, we have lots of dry goods but nothing perishable. Lyla's going to run by the store before coming back."

"She's already left?" Oliver questions, surprised.

"Yeah, Lyla's not much for sleeping in," Sara tells him. "Said she needed to run interference with Waller, but she'll be back around noon."

"Can she pick up some of my clothes on the way back?" Connor asks hopefully.

It's only then that Oliver realizes the boy is wearing the same clothes he has been for days. ARGUS
might have stocked this place well for adults, but it wasn't prepared for kids.

"We'll get you a few outfits today," Oliver promises. "And new shoes."

There's dried blood on the bottom of Connor's pants. Oliver can only imagine what the boy's shoes look like at this point, as he too is barefoot. He shouldn't have to deal with this, shouldn't have assassins and blood-stained clothes in his life. His biggest concern should be what to have for breakfast.

"Want some dried fruit? Hash browns?" Oliver suggests.

"I am a most proficient cook," Nyssa assures him with a fierceness that Oliver finds a little ridiculous in context. But she takes her role as Connor's protector quite seriously, even in terms of feeding him, it seems.

"Sure," Connor says with a one-shouldered shrug.

He looks a little hesitant, gulps as he bites his lip and looks at Oliver strangely, apparently warring with himself over something. Oliver smiles at his son encouragingly and that seems to tip the scales for Connor. Suddenly, there's a lump of ten-year-old hugging him tightly. It takes Oliver only a small surprised moment before he hugs the boy back. If there's quiet approval on Felicity's face or a watery smile on Sandra's, Oliver misses them both because his focus is suddenly, absolutely centered on Connor.

"Thanks, dad," Connor mutters against him.

The thanks could be for anything. Connor's not really clear about it. But, ultimately, of the two words that's the less important one. The quiet 'dad' gets him, hits him in a way he couldn't possibly have anticipated even a few days ago. So he hugs his son tighter and drops a kiss on the crown of his head before letting him go and stepping back, a hand settling on the boy's shoulder instead, reluctant to let go of the boy entirely.

"How's Digg?" Oliver asks, looking to Sandra.

"Recovering well," she tells him, dragging her eyes from their son to look at Oliver. "It'll be a bit before he's up and about again, but I'm more optimistic than I was yesterday.

"Good," Oliver says with a sigh of relief. "I'll check on him after I've seen Tommy and talked to Sergei."

"What time does Anatoly get in?" Felicity asks him.

"I'm not sure," Oliver tells her. "He's supposed to call me when he gets to town. Sometime today, that's all I know. But before that, we need to get an idea of what the League is up to. I'm going to see what Tommy knows, but… Nyssa, Sara, we'll need to have a talk about Ra's later, too."

"My insight is at your disposal," Nyssa says, serving up a plate of hash browns and dried fruit to Connor.

"You got it, Ollie," Sara nods, all of her earlier playfulness dissipating.

It's striking, sometimes, how quickly she shifts, how her mask falls into place. Sometimes… sometimes she's the Sara of before, playful and suggestive and free-spirited, like earlier. Or at least she seems that way. But then there's this, there's the Canary, Ta-er al-Sah-fer, a creature of vengeance and justice for whom playfulness is nothing but a dim memory. He understands that
dichotomy better than most. He's lived it, too. These days, he thinks he's doing a better job of balancing who he was with who he became in those five years away. A lot of that is thanks to his relationship with Felicity, but even more of it is because of the team, the mission, the shared sense of purpose he's found with this makeshift family.

And suddenly, miraculously, there's a chance for Tommy to be a part of that again. He's missed him. Badly. He hadn't quite realized how much until the mask fell away in the Queen Consolidated lobby and he saw his best friend's face again. Tommy's been his brother since before he knew the meaning of the word. Having him back, having the chance to have him back… it means so much.

"Mind if I take some of that to bring down to Tommy?" Oliver asks, nodding toward the rather sizable platter of hash browns that Nyssa's cooked up.

"Of course," Nyssa says, hesitating for a moment before she continues. "I would ask that you inform him I wish to have a conversation with him."

"You think he won't want to talk to you?" Oliver questions.

"I am daughter to Ra's al Ghul," she reminds him.

"And he's son to Malcolm Merlyn," Oliver points out. "I think if anyone would be able to look past some less than ideal family connections, it would be him."

"You say this, but Malcolm Merlyn has done little to me, save avoid my sword," Nyssa notes. "Ra's has brought untold suffering upon your Tommy, brainwashed him and molded him in his own image. I will speak with him regardless. It is too important that we collaborate regarding my father's agenda to defer on account of his inevitable discomfort. I wish only to give him the courtesy of forewarning that I shall be paying him a visit in short order."

"Okay," Oliver agrees, taking a plate from her outstretched hand. "I'll tell him."

She makes a valid point. He has only an inkling of what Tommy's been through. It's going to be a long road back to something like normal for him and his feelings about anyone with connections to the League may well be conflicted.

"Felicity…" Oliver starts before she holds up her hand and interrupts him.

"I will recheck the security systems for the umpteenth time as soon as I've finished eating," she promises. "Now stop procrastinating and go see how your newly not-dead best friend is doing."

He pauses at that, taking in her raised eyebrows and challenging stare. Is he? Procrastinating? Maybe. The thought hadn't occurred to him, but when he thinks about it he's at least as nervous about seeing Tommy as he is excited about it. Is he still Tommy this morning? Or is he al Mobaath? Will Tommy know him? Will he resent him for everything he's done? Will he know himself? Will he hate himself? Oliver's not good at dealing with these things. He never has been. He's not even good at recognizing them. But Felicity is.

"Yeah," he agrees, ruffling Connor's hair affectionately as the boy inhales a plate of hash browns with gusto that only a growing boy can have. "I'll be back in a bit."
Hours before, after Malcolm had offered up his horrifying parental approval and sauntered away from the holding cells with Russian mobsters as jailers-turned-bodyguards, Tommy Merlyn had screamed himself hoarse. It had proven an exercise in futility. He hadn't stopped until his voice was fully gone, though. The stakes were too high.

What had his father done? Was Thea okay? Was Laurel? Was Oliver? He hadn't heard fighting so he assumes that Malcolm escaped undetected. But to what end? He was safe here. Protected. Why go to so much effort to escape? Why was it worth the risk?

Tommy's seen enough of this world by this point to have a few ideas about that and all of them are bone-chilling.

Malcolm Merlyn has always been most concerned with what he can do to benefit Malcolm Merlyn. If he wanted to leave here… well that seems to imply that here isn't safe, doesn't it? Or at least that there's something to be gained by being elsewhere. That's unsettling, leaves Tommy feeling like he isn't seeing the whole picture. And he needs to see the whole picture. This is a puzzle he has to put together.

And yet, even the feeling of unease and sense of foreboding is strangely welcome. Al Mobaath wouldn't have felt anything at all. Al Mobaath would have been, at most, vaguely annoyed at Al Sah-her for evading his plans. And Tommy… Tommy will relish anything that proves he's still Tommy these days.

"Where's Sergei?"

Tommy jolts off of his cot at Oliver's sudden and unexpected presence. He's barely slept, too on-edge from his father's escape and too worried for Thea for dreams to claim him, but that doesn't mean that he isn't fully awake now. Being Al Mobaath has taught him how to function with almost machine-like efficiency, even when he's hungry, exhausted, brutally injured. This is one of the many things that are a part of him now. And one of the few that doesn't leave him with a sense of absolute horror.

"I tried to get someone's attention. Anyone's," Tommy tells his friend, his voice coming out strained and raspy from too much prolonged use. "He let my father out. They're gone. They left hours ago."

"What?" Oliver asks, some mixture of shock and fear painting his expressive blue eyes.

"Thea," Tommy tells him with pressing urgency. "You need to check on Thea."

He hasn't even finished the sentence before Oliver's running back up the stairs, a plate of hash browns he'd been carrying sitting forgotten on a bench outside of Tommy's cell.

Tommy's hungry. He's not even sure when last he ate, honestly, but he wouldn't be able to eat right now even if he could reach the food. He's nauseous at the idea that his father might have taken Thea or hurt Laurel. And it's a very long ten minutes where all of the worst-case scenarios play through Tommy's mind over and over before Oliver returns, grim-faced but not distraught.

"She's fine," are the first words out of Oliver's mouth.

Tommy lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding at the words and a healthy portion of the tension living in his body leaves on the exhale.

"Is Laurel...?" Tommy starts, unable to complete his thought aloud.

"She's fine, too," Oliver assures him. "Everyone's accounted for, other than Malcolm and the Bratva
men, of course."

"And my father is nowhere to be found, I'm sure," Tommy bites out.

"We're looking for him," Oliver assures him.

"He could be anywhere by now," Tommy points out. "He's got a hell of a head start."

"He's not going to go far," Oliver says, shaking his head. "He wants to take over as Ra's and, twisted as he is, he wants to protect Thea, too. I don't think he'll leave the city."

"That's not exactly what I would call reassuring," Tommy points out.

Oliver doesn't respond with words but the tightness of his lips and the tilt of his head clearly indicates his agreement. Tommy has no doubt that he wishes Malcolm were as far away from Thea as possible. It's one thing they both absolutely agree on.

"Tommy, I will find him. I promise you," Oliver vows, his voice heavy with the weight of his promise.

"What happened, anyhow?" Tommy questions. "Don't you have some kind of security system set up?"

"Sergei turned it off," Oliver grimaces.

"How did he manage that?" Tommy asks curiously. "Isn't your girl supposed to be the best technical support this side of Microsoft?"

"Microsoft? She'd be so insulted at... But, how do you know that about her?" Oliver asks as the words register more fully in his head. "You barely knew Felicity."

Tommy pauses at his question, knowing that any response will offer little reassurance in this already-tense situation. But, he also knows this is just the tip of the iceberg as far as their uncomfortable conversations are bound to go.

"Ollie... the League is well aware about the strengths of everyone you rely on," Tommy tells him after a beat.

Oliver's brow furrows at that and looks back at the stairs like he's set to dart back up to check on his girlfriend, even though he clearly saw her just moments ago and knows she's fine. It's interesting, from Tommy's perspective, seeing Oliver like this with a woman. It's different than he was with Laurel. More mature, maybe? More protective? It tells Tommy a lot about who he's become these last few years. Truth be told, it's a good change.

He wishes he could dwell on that. Really, he does. But their lives have gotten so complicated. He doesn't have the chance to poke good-naturedly at the changes in his friend. There's too much else to deal with. And, really, he's not sure he has it in him to be a good-natured jokester anymore.

"They didn't bypass her security," Oliver offers finally after a moment, keying in a code to open the door to Tommy's cell and walking in with the plate of food in hand. "They had access because I gave it to them."

"Looks like you need to pick who to trust better," Tommy responds, glancing from the food to the open door. "Present company included."
"If you think you can get past me, go ahead and try," Oliver challenges with raised eyebrows.

It's bait that Tommy won't take. He knows better than that. He takes the plate of food instead.

"I think you're foolish to give me the opportunity," he responds instead, taking a forkful of food and eating it without really tasting it.

"I'm not going to keep you in here forever," Oliver clarifies. "I hate putting you in here at all."

"I belong here," Tommy says sharply, looking back at Oliver.

"Tommy," Oliver starts, shaking his head.

"I do!" Tommy insists, setting the plate down, the fork clattering against the dish. "After what I've done? What I've tried to do? I deserve this. I deserve worse than this."

"And me?" Oliver asks.

"What?" Tommy questions, confusion painted on his face.

"After what I've done, what I've tried to do, do I belong in here, too?" he asks.

Tommy pauses at that. He'd have said yes, once upon a time. He'd been disgusted at what Oliver had become before the walls of CNRI had crumbled down. Now… now he's a lot less sure.

"That's different," Tommy says, because any other answer is too complicated.

"Yeah. It is," Oliver agrees. "I was fully aware of everything I was doing. The whole time. You weren't."

"That makes me more dangerous, Ollie. Not less," Tommy points out. "And it doesn't mean there's any less blood on my hands."

"Thea and Laurel got through to you once. They could do it again if they needed to," Oliver tells him with confidence that Tommy doesn't share. "And the blood on your hands… that never goes away, but you can learn to live with it. I can help you with that. I want to help you with that."

Tommy lets out a wet laugh as he sits back down on his cot and looks up toward Oliver with disbelief.

"I had Laurel terrified, tied to a chair so tightly that her wrists and ankles will probably scar. I had Thea at swordpoint. I could have killed either of them as easily as breathing and you want to rely on their emotional impact on me to keep me sane?" Tommy asks in astonishment.

"Could have," Oliver echoes back at him. "You could have killed either of them. You didn't. Don't forget that part."

"I don't know how either of them can ever trust me again," Tommy shakes his head. "I don't know how you can either."

"That's because you don't trust yourself," Oliver counters.

Tommy tilts his head in thought. There's some measure of truth to that. Tommy doesn't trust himself. He's not sure he ever will again, not after everything that's happened, not after he lost control over who he was, what he did.
"I know it doesn't seem like it now, but... you can't do this alone," Oliver tells him, sitting down next to him on the cot.

"I can't huh?" Tommy throws out offhandedly.

"Luckily, you don't have to," Oliver tells him. "We won't let you."

"Ollie..." Tommy sighs.

"You helped me," Oliver tells him. "It's past time I returned the favor."

"Man, what are you talking about?" Tommy asks, blinking at him.

"You reminded me that I could be better, showed me I needed to be better, that I didn't have to keep being a killer just because I had been one," Oliver tells him.

There's a silence that stretches between them as Tommy studies his friend's intense gaze and thinks through the meaning behind it.

"You stopped killing after I died," Tommy thinks aloud.

"Yeah," Oliver confirms.

"Because I'd told you to?" Tommy wonders openly.

"Because you knew that wasn't me. Because you believed that I could be more than the hand of vengeance," Oliver confesses. "I couldn't keep being someone you didn't respect, Tommy. Your opinion has always meant too much to me for that."

"Oliver..." Tommy says with a shake of his head, not sure exactly how to finish that sentence.

"I'm not saying it will be easy for you," Oliver clarifies. "It won't. There will be days where you feel the weight of everything you've done weighing down on you so hard you feel like maybe you won't be able to breathe. But I'll be here. Thea will be here. And Laurel. And we'll remind you to take another breath, that it won't always be like this.

"Sometimes..." he continues, taking a heavy breath and licking his lips as he looks around the room like the words he wants might materialize on the walls. "Sometimes, when all you can see is darkness, you just have to keep walking until you see the light."

"You've gotten maudlinly poetic in your post-homicidal days," Tommy deflects, blinking hard as he gulps.

"Doesn't it make you wonder?" Oliver asks with a thin smile.

"Wonder what?" Tommy asks.

"What you'll be like after you're past it," he clarifies.

And, to Tommy's everlasting surprise... it does.

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