Summary

Because some secrets are always about blood...
(Note: Warning will relate to later chapters, which will also have their own warnings at the start.)
Okay, sorry for the wait, guys!
If you want my excuses:
I'm afraid I got distracted by a fan fic I was reading (JSevick's Of Monsters & Mai Tais: a delightful Arrow/Jurassic World crossover), and that got me thinking about that crossover. Which I may or may not post eventually, but it'll be a while because I'm still more in the idea phase.
Then, of course, Season 4 started, and that would've been fine (more than fine in many ways since the wait was finally over), but that ending scene of 6 months in the future hit me hard. I've gotten over it. Mostly. I think. Though I may boycott Season 5 if Felicity actually dies and there aren't any rumors about her being brought back.
(Which, considering THIS crossover is maybe a bit ironic, but I'm venting a little. Sorry.) But after reading a few stories by similarly perturbed Olicity authors I feel a little better. I suppose, at the very least, it's a guarantee that it won't happen till around the second to last episode of the season... Anyway...
So, if you're actually going back to re-read the revisions (and in some cases, you really should, there were a few new things there), you'll know I have not yet finished revising Deadly Dances. I'm more than halfway through revising Deadly Dances, and everything before that is done, but there's still a few more chapters to go. I don't think there'll be too many changes there, though, so I've decided to start posting Bloody Secrets today anyway. Because I honestly feel bad for leaving you hanging so long on the series, and I miss some of the comments that really did help me shape where this series was going. Some of you were just encouragement, which is always appreciated just like constructive criticism is, but a few of you were offering some pretty good analyses and ideas, too, so I'm curious to see what you'll have to say about Bloody Secrets as I start posting it. I may go back to change a few of the early scenes if the end of the last part DOES have some unforeseen affect, but otherwise I'll just mention when that part of revising is finally done as I go along.
That said, I do need some encouragement on this story. Because while I have over fifty-thousand words written so far most of them are closer to the end of the Bloody Secrets than the start. This has left me kind of grasping around in the dark as I try to start the story, because my muses aren't all that interested in starting this story so much as ending it. It's a really weird state of mind of be stuck in. So any ideas or inspiration would be appreciated.
Again, sorry for the wait, hope this was worth it. Enjoy! :-) Oh, and Happy Halloween!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity groaned, dropping her head into her hands for a moment of totally self-pitying aggravation as both of the programs she'd been waiting on failed.
The search for Floyd Lawton (A.K.A Deadshot) coming up empty for the moment, again, wasn't all the surprising. The assassin was apparently laying too low for technology to find right now. If he was paid anything even close to the price promised the arrowed Guillermo Barrera (A.K.A Brutale), he shouldn't need to take another job all that soon. If need was a driving factor in his career choice; but judging by what she'd found of said criminal career it really wasn't.

So he might surface soon. Or not. Or not.

At the moment she could only hope for the best—and try not to think that her hoping to hear about someone being assassinated by a professional sniper was a bad thing. People dying before their time wasn't at all a new thing in the world, and to find Deadshot she needed more information. More assassinations and the like would be something she could use to try and figure out what his real drives were, and therefore where he might be next. For John Diggle's sake.

The careful codes she had surfing Merlyn Global also coming up empty though, again, was very much like those times she'd been looking forward to some delicious baked delight or another, but let herself get distracted too long and ended up with charcoal instead. Except she hadn't been distracted—by another Immortal nearby, memories best left forgotten, other computer codes or anything else—she hadn't even stepped away. She'd been sitting right here for hours, monitoring and intermittently tweaking. So it didn't seemed fair that she could almost smell the burnt would-be dessert's remains in her nostrils.

It almost made her want to be at least a little less careful; try a brute force attack out of sheer frustration. But she knew better. She would even if the man she was trying to look into wasn't maybe a member of the League of Assassins who happened to have another Immortal employed on his cyber security staff. Another Immortal who might be looking for her as it was, whether the C.E.O of his current career's company wasn't some sort of sleeper agent for a former student of hers or not. Though said former student having possibly been driven made by the power of too many Dark Quickenings while she wasn't paying close enough attention from afar wasn't something she wanted to think about at all.

If she had to pick any one thing she truly hated about Immortality, it'd have to be a pretty close call between all the loved ones she'd lost and the Quickenings.

That a powerful light Quickening could turn even the most evil of Immortals into decent individuals might be seen as a good thing by some, but she'd been friends with the pacifist who's beheading had turned a vicious Roman conqueror into a pacifistic priest.

Felicity couldn't help but flinch at the memories—it'd been hard enough to accept Darius's sincere
apologies when murdering Haraonos Emrys had both made him realize the error of his ways and made her brother the world's oldest Immortal. It was confusing to consider how much of Darius was the warrior general he'd been before that day, and how much was the gentle healer he'd murdered. Her friend. Methos had had an easier time accepting Haraonos's choice and thus Darius' apologies; with his history, perhaps he felt he had to. Felicity had had to force a lot of smiles for a long time, at least until the former Roman general had continued Haraonos's work long enough for her to see some of the friend she'd lost was still in his killer. That the ancient that asked her how best to approach the mortal warrior queen who'd rebelled against Rome—what advice would make her want peace even if it was with the Romans—wasn't completely gone. That Haraonos Emry's killer had become more Haraonos than the man he'd been before he swung his sword for the last time.

Yes, after she and Methos had both seen signs of their lost friend in Darius had eventually led to both of them forgiving him. Mostly because it's what Haraonos would've wanted, as he had essentially offered his head and Quickening up to the younger Immortal for the exact purpose his death had ultimately served. But it'd taken Felicity a lot longer to visit that church than her somewhat more forgiving teacher.

Even worse than Light Quickenings, however, were Dark ones. Felicity hated to think how much harder it would be if the opposite had really happened—if someone she called a friend was now her enemy because he'd ended one evil existence too many. It was truthfully a fate she'd feared from the moment the possibility it'd happening had occurred to her. More from the thought of having to kill a friend because of it than out of any real fear for herself.

Then again, if it came down to it she might well make the same choice Haraonos had made almost two-thousand years ago. Which was undoubtedly exactly why the few Dark Quickening situations that'd arisen over the years Methos had dealt with without ever considering asking for her help.

But he wasn't the one that'd realized the potential problem this time, and Mazin was never his student...

"Anything?" Oliver's query from up by the ceiling made her pity party end, her focus narrowing in on his fit form instead of her past with no small amount of relief.

Though Felicity didn't particularly like the pull-ups on the pipes. The old steel factory's plumbing, while at one time cutting edge and now impressively enduring, wasn't built with safety standards for exercise enthusiasts in mind. And the view, though not capable of being called unattractive, was a lot harder to watch when that involved craning her neck at an awkward angle it didn't like for just a few seconds, let alone actively watching.

"Felicity?"
"What? Oh, no, sorry," the Immortal sighed, trying to turn the unhappy tenseness out of her neck before she looked back at her computers. The messages on the monitors sadly hadn't changed to more happy, or at least helpful, tidings. "Lawton's laying low. He's not showing up anywhere yet. There's still a lot to go through at Merlyn Global—I can't really rush it anymore than I have without attracting attention. And I haven't completely cracked the Starling Triad's firewalls yet."

The thump of the vigilante suddenly dropping down from the ceiling made her wince, even though she knew from the sound that he'd landed it right and was fine. It wasn't even that she didn't think it could be done. What she hadn't learned from Methos or some of her other mentors when it came to physical fitness she'd had to learn as an Amazon. But she'd broken enough bones to know how much it hurt—and those without either a Quickening immortalizing them from inside or even the magic that most of the world's remaining Amazons relied on took such a long time to heal.

His hands on her shoulders were less surprising; she'd heard him coming, of course, but she hadn't expected him to start kneading the knots in and around her neck.

For a moment, Felicity could only melt. Being an Immortal, with the Quickening keeping her healthy and ensuring her metabolism never stopped burning at full power actually meant it was harder for to to stay fighting trim. Especially since that fitness could be the difference between life and death any day of every year. That didn't mean she didn't feel pain though. She could ignore it, of course, it'd been millennia since Methos had taught her the necessity of mental fortitude, and her endurance had only grown with each moment it'd needed to. But sometimes her body still complained, and those complaints didn't merit meditation or rest or the any sort of medical attention. However, Strong, skilled hands massaging aching muscles—any muscles, really—had always been a weakness of hers.

"Why are you hacking the Triad?" Oliver wanted to know, not at all distracted from the task his hands were so easily performing.

Felicity released a sigh before she answered. "They hired him," she leaned back even more as the archer's fingers found that one particularly pained spot, biting back a groan as he zeroed in on it. Then she made herself go on. "They paid him. The money might leave a trail for me to follow."

"He didn't finish the job, he might not have been paid for it. And they're not going to keep records of—"

"Maybe not. But once I know more of their banking info I can find patterns. Maybe track them to Deadshot or..." she trailed off, not wanting to remind him again of the legitimate suspicions Diggle had raised till she actually found the proof.
Oliver's fingers paused for just a second, before resuming their delightful assault while he asked. "Don't we already know the account? From Barrera's phone? He was paid when he arrived in Starling City."

"Yeah, half a million up front, the rest after," Felicity confirmed, then shook her head the tiny distance she could with his hands working magic via the pressure points and loosening tension knots along the back of her neck.

She didn't care at all that he was essentially using his masseuse skills to make her more pliable than she might otherwise be to his interrogation because she'd have told him all of this anyway. And she could finally ignore the fact that he was likely trying to sneakily check on her shoulder again because even a mortal should be mostly healed of the slight cut she let him see—both the first, real one that'd had a few hours to mend itself and the second one she'd made herself and partially healed in the shower after that, just so he could feel better after checking on it 'again' had hopefully made him think it wasn't as bad as he thought. Yup—there was the slightly more hesitant prodding closer to the 'injury'—she shifted slightly away from it without even really thinking about it, not a flinch but an awareness that was entirely tied to what he was doing rather than any actual pain at all.

"I still don't get that," Felicity admitted, leaning slightly to shift his touch back to where the last tight knot of tension was shallowly entrenched. "I mean, Chien Na Wei's an assassin, and a knife fighter, herself. Why would she hire Barrera? He'd have used knives—would've had to get a lot closer than a sniper like Deadshot to throw one of his knives at a target. Just like she would."

"He would have been inside the party," Oliver agreed. "Just like all of the Triad soldiers were," he shook his head. "He would've had a harder time than he was expecting. The Triad, too. They never would've agreed to try and take out someone of Mister Merlyn's skill set at a public event like that, not without a lot more muscle. Not with a close-quarters fighter like Barrera, either, rather than Lawton. Not if they had any idea he could fight back effectively."

Felicity considered not saying anything more pointed about it, but it wasn't really a conversation that could be avoid too long, so she went with it. "So that rules out the Chinese mafia knowing he could fight, right?" She tilted her head to look at him, "And whoever hired them."

"My mom, you mean," Oliver was frowning as he shook his head. "You don't have to avoid it for me, Felicity. I can't pretend anymore."

Felicity swallowed, but nodded. "Yeah. Okay. Your Mom. Maybe." That got a slight upward quirk to one side of his mouth, then she closed her eyes as he started rubbing harder again.
"The Triad didn't know. Maybe they still don't. You said the tapes of that part of the security system were overwritten, right?"

"Yeah. He must've called someone from the hospital."

"Or someone at Merlyn Global knew to check for that sort of thing before handing anything over to the police."

"Maybe," Felicity agreed, not letting herself frown as she wondered whether or not the man she'd met, who'd adapted to modern times much like she had, might've been the one to do that for Malcolm Merlyn or not.

If so, it did make some sense to her. His name was Polish, and so was the accent he hadn't completely lost and didn't work at hiding. So he wasn't old enough to realize the value of such minute alterations—even though changing his name entirely would've made more sense. But maybe his teacher just hadn't been as thorough as Methos. Actually, it'd surprise her if anyone else was as thorough as the man that'd been seeking redemption from his Age as Death. Starek's Quickening wasn't that strong, either—enough for a few centuries and a few random duels won. And mixed in with the slightly uncomfortable degree of interest that made her think he might not have met a female Immortal before were more than a few of the characteristics that reminded her of the Szlachta. If he was raised in their times of privilege and suffered their losses thereafter, he probably still felt cheated by what he'd lost from his childhood. Such things didn't diminish quickly for Immortals, so even a few lifetimes, or centuries, sometimes didn't lessen them all that much. Coming to America, where education would allow him to prosper if he worked at it, a former courtier of that diminished regime might find nothing wrong with working for a man like Malcolm Merlyn—whether he was a somewhat free agent of the League of Assassins or a renegade. Though if it was the latter, as Felicity hoped, Starek would be wiser to distance himself as far from Tommy's father as he could. And if it was the former, well Starek likely wasn't nearly old enough to know how badly that could go for everyone involved.

Even under Oliver's masterful manipulations, thinking about whether or not her student might now be a demon not just in name but in fact made her tense again. Just for the moment it took her to realize she was doing it and it, but it was more than enough time for the observant man to notice since he was trying working the tension out of those same muscles.

Oliver waited a long moment, his fingers kneading at that new tension; only asking as she managed to make herself calm down again. "Felicity?"

She thought of pretending it was nothing. That she'd forgotten she had to do something and she had
to go, something like that. She was a good enough actress to fool most people, mortals especially. But lying to someone she cared about had never come easily to her, and it already felt like she was lying too much by omission. The arrow in her ear was only a symbol of the place the hero himself had somehow already taken in her heart, and she couldn't bring herself to lie to him.

So, instead, she evaded just a little with a question. "Have you thought about where he might've trained? Learned... how to kill like that?"

All the while, Oliver's hands never stopped massaging. The subject obviously wasn't so touchy for him—maybe because it was Tommy who was his friend, after all, and Malcolm Merlyn hadn't been a good father to that friend in far too long. For most of both their childhoods. Abandonment wasn't something children forgot easily, especially once they were grown—when all the years in between would only make forgiveness seem more and more impossible.

Felicity could understand it; why Malcolm Merlyn might've gone looking for something after his wife's murder. Why not being there for his wife when she needed him might've made it hard to be there for his son, thereby making it hard for him to recognize that he should be going on for their son. And if needing to find answers, to find strength was what'd led him to Nanda Parbat, he would have been welcomed there. Where broken people were supposedly made new again. If they were worthy.

But she couldn't explain it to her vigilante.

He'd be interested if she did, but to do that she'd have to explain how she knew enough to explain it. More than enough. Because Oliver hadn't reacted at all to the mention of Nanda Parbat, so wherever he'd been over the last five years he hadn't heard those sort of specifics regarding the League of Assassins. If he'd ever heard anything at all about them.

That mysterious, hard half decade of Oliver's life made it a little easier to justify her continuing secrecy and reliance on assumptions to protect her own past. It also made precisely predicting his reactions somewhat difficult. Even he considered those the defining years of his adult life; having led up to who he was today, despite his unwillingness to talk much about it.

It made it very tempting to just keep mum. Enjoy a few years of his company (massages and all), help where she could, and then just stage her death and move on when her eternal youth became too noticed. She'd done it before. What seemed like many, many times in fact. A tiring number of times really. She didn't remember the very thought of doing it ever feeling quite so very painful from the very start though.
"...city? Felicity? Hey," Oliver's voice broke into her musings just as she realized her massage had halted. And because he was turning her chair away from her computers with one hand now, while the other caught her chin and turned her face towards his. "Hey, stop worrying so much, okay? Tommy's dad being able to defend himself, and Tommy, doesn't have to be a bad thing."

"Even if Digg is right about your mom?" Felicity forced herself to say it because it had to be said, but she bit her lip as soon as she finished to keep an automatic apology from slipping out when he winced.

It couldn't be denied that Oliver was a strong fighter and a driven man who was smarter than he pretended to be, but he was also a loving son despite the careless image he sometimes had to play. So the idea that his mother had caused everything they'd fought to prevent a few nights ago had to hurt.

Oliver shook his head, big hands shifting to frame her face so his thumb could pry her lower lip free from her teeth as he answered. "Maybe he is right. Maybe Mister Merlyn is dangerous to more than just hitmen. And maybe my mom has a good reason for wanting Tommy's dad dead." His hand moved slowly back into her hair, finding that spot behind her ear with the same accuracy he fired arrows with. "We don't know. Don't waste energy worrying about it until we know we have to. All right?"

Felicity was torn. Wanting to agree because he was asking it of her and it already felt wrong that she hadn't told him he didn't have to worry about anyone hurting her in any way that didn't involve decapitation—and that she could take care of herself anyway. That she'd been around, taking care of herself and others, for a very long time.

It might be nice to pretend she hadn't heart Malcolm Merlyn talk about meeting a man at a place called Nanda Parbat. To pretend that she didn't know the only man he could mean. But it wasn't something that could be let go.

Not when Tommy's father spoke of making Starling City a better place and that he'd learned how to do so from the League of Assassins. After all, he wasn't trying to save the city the way Oliver was: by taking justice into his own hands, under orders or not. That ruled out the more direct application of the skills he could've learned in the Hindu Kush. Leaving a much longer end-game at play here... and possible a broken promise that also couldn't be let go.

Her head turned and tilted automatically as the archer's hands directed it to, but the soft pressure on her lips a moment later made every single thought in her head halt. Because she hadn't been biting her lip again and both his hands were still framing her face, holding her unnecessarily in place, as his warm, slightly chapped lips molded with hers.
It was careful and chaste; sweet, and as confusing as it was surprising...

Oliver had been increasingly tactile since they'd watched a parody of fairytales and then fallen asleep on her couch only a few minutes into the subsequent movie he'd eventually picked at random by making her close her eyes and then doing the same before scrolling and pushing play without looking at whatever it was he'd landed on. Which was actually a movie she'd never seen, but she also hadn't recognized anyone in those few minutes she kept trying to pry her eyelids apart so she probably wouldn't re-watch it anytime soon anyway. Since then, Oliver's hands had found her shoulders, her hair, her neck very often.

Mostly her shoulders at first; particularly the injured one she hadn't let him check again because she really didn't want to cut it open yet again to make it look like she didn't heal any faster than a normal human being. The frequency of those touches didn't seem to be diminishing with all the times she hadn't faked flinches as he checked her shoulder, though; if anything they were still steadily increasing.

Felicity hadn't minded. It'd been a lot longer than five years since she'd been in a really meaningful relationship, so she didn't mind it where this was going at all. Actually, the former playboy was going slower than she probably would if she'd decided to set the tempo—carefully, methodically, in a way she doubted he'd ever been before the boat wreck that claimed his father's life and changed his irrevocably.

But she wasn't sure where the kiss had come from.

A moment later Oliver was pulling away, eyes opening to hold her blinking, bewildered gaze as steadily as he still held her face between his palms.

"What was that?" the Immortal blinked at him.

"Something else to think about," Oliver told her with his small smile, which was really just the very edges of his mouth quirking up. Then he shook his head. "I mean it, Felicity. Stop worrying so much. It won't help."

For a second the Immortal woman could only keep blinking at him, but then her tongue was moving any prior permission from her. "I might, if it means we keep doing that."
Oliver's face softened even more than the gently earnest look he'd already been hitting her with, but instead of kissing her again he shook his head. "No," he told her, mercifully going on before her heart could start to die another hundred times. "You deserve better than that, Felicity."

He didn't actually say it, but she had the distinct idea that what he really meant was: 'you deserve better than me.' That she couldn't agree with. No matter what Oliver had done in his twenty-eight years on this Earth, she'd surely done worse.

And the fact that he cared so much about whatever he had done told her that he wasn't irredeemable. Just the opposite. If only she could make him see that... Such things took time though, and baby step by baby step.

Still, there was something she could say right now. With her face still held in place, somewhat surprisingly very comfortable in his hands, Felicity couldn't shake her head, but her mouth still worked. "My life, my choice, Oliver. And I'm sure I know what I deserved better than—"

His index and pointer finger on her lips were half of what made her trail off, but it was mostly his intent eyes—and that small start of a smile that made more appearances than any full smile could on his serious face—that made her stay silent long enough for him to talk instead. How was it that the firm press of his fingertips on her lips could feel just as intimate as his lips had?

"A real date first," Oliver insisted softly. "I'm trying to be a better man than I was," he reminded her.

That made Felicity frown and jerk her head free, trying not to miss his hands as he let them drop while their gazes stayed locked. "You weren't a man then, Oliver," she told him carefully. "In many ways you were still a boy. A boy who didn't deserve what hap—"

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't," he interrupted firmly, hands curling slightly at his side as he did so. Curling—but not in that way that looked like he was subconsciously wondering where his bow was, so he was just as calm as he appeared. "You still deserve better."

"Fine." Felicity allowed, arching an eyebrow at him. "How about tomorrow night then?"

Oliver blinked, but then surprised her with a smile. Still a relatively small smile, but it was sincere—and as devastating as all his smiles probably were. "All right. When and where?"
"I get off work at five-thirty."

He considered that, then offered, "So, eight?"

Felicity laughed, pleased to see her own enjoyment shining back at her in his eyes. "Depends on where we're going? You know Starling City better than I ever will."

There was still a lot to worry about, of course, but that didn't mean they should stop living. It was a relief to see that Oliver, despite everything he didn't talk about suffering through in the last five years, was still able to see that. Even if worrying about her 'mysterious injury' and stress levels was what brought it out.

What's more, the world was only so big. For Deadshot it would keep getting smaller now that she was looking for him.

If Malcolm Merlyn was here doing something the League didn't approve of, they'd handle him. If not... well, she needed to start building that bridge just in case, but she'd had the plans and framework in places for decades now, just in case. The only real questions there were just how many steps she could take before Mazin realized what she was doing. Or Methos noticed there might be a problem.

It helped, however, that even while looking for them over the last several days, Felicity hadn't found any signs at all that a significantly dangerous Dark Immortal had risen in recent years. Yes, that was exactly one of things her student's organization was primarily designed to fight, so if he'd turned they'd know how to hide most of the indications, but no one was perfect. Yet what few signs she'd found of what might be League of Assassins actions were all within the acceptable parameters her student had agreed to early on. So hopefully whatever was happening in Starling City, her home, wouldn't be a problem in that regard.

"Do you like Italian?" Oliver's question drew her out of her now only semi-darkening thoughts again, and she immediately flashed him a smile, both in gratitude and to hopeful hide her return to worrying.

"I love Italian."

"Great, me too," he nodded slowly.
She could see the questions he wasn't asking behind his eyes, just like she was sure he could see that he was still worrying. Nonetheless, they were making progress. Little by little.

Chapter End Notes

It's started again! Now, I know that with Season 4 continuing every week for a little while to come fan fics are a little less in demand, but I still felt bad for not getting this going sooner, so here you go.
As I indicated earlier; ideas, comments, etc., would be appreciated. I already have some of this fic written and I'll try to keep the chapters coming fairly steadily even as I finish editing Deadly Dances, but every little bit helps!
What do you think should come next?
What storylines still needs answers (yes, I know them - I literally have them listed, and some of them were already mentioned here) but which ones are you actually interested in?
This series is essentially following the episodes as a rough guideline, so next is the Huntress Returns. That, of course, means Helena. I do have plans there, obviously, since I've already written 50K words, but I wouldn't mind more ideas. Maybe you'll say something more interesting than what I've got in store and my muses will kidnap it! They DO do that.
And thanks, again, to everyone who's commented and kudos'd in the series so far. You really do make writing this worthwhile.
More to come soon! :-}
It's back again!
I still haven't completely finished editing Deadly Dances, but I'm almost there.
However, I did sort of make a liar of myself. Because I did make another little change in the later chapters. I really thought I'd only be doing nitty-gritty grammatical and structural editing here and there once the attack at Merlyn Global started, but another possibility shot out at me, and I couldn't resist it. If you have already gone back to re-read before this, the new change is in the scenes before Tommy's P.O.V. Involving Lieutenant Pike. It's nothing huge, but it is there, and it'll probably be mentioned, at some point, later. However, I AM almost done editing there... Hopefully I'll be able to focus just on this soon. *fingers crossed* (Because I've been dividing my attention between this story and editing the earlier ones since I first 'finished' Deadly Dances. It'd kind of exhausting...)
Anyway, the next part of Bloody Secrets is here. Enjoy! :-)
weapons were higher end than Special Forces could normally expect to be provided with, but also the sort of purchases that should've merited a visit from an A.T.F agent at some point.)

Regardless, complete reliance on firearms was never a good idea. The weapon could, after all, be taken away or unavailable when needed.

His time with the military, both the initial training and his later tours, meant that John was not helpless without a gun of some kind in his hands. All the same, it'd become clear to him early on that Oliver Queen was someone he should be open to learning a little from, if only to improve himself.

After who knows how many of these sparring sessions, John would like to think that he might last longer against the deadly Triad assassin that Oliver hadn't had any qualms about facing again at Merlyn Global. He refused to let that moment where he realized the knife the woman wielded could very well end his life, if not for the timely intervention of his client throwing a kitchenknife accurately enough to disarm her from across the room.

However, John was a realist too. China White wasn't someone he'd voluntarily engage in hand-to-hand combat with; not when knives were clearly her weapon of choice and brute strength definitely couldn't be relied upon against her.

Still, he'd keep learning.

**CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!**

**CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!**

He was getting a bit better at the variable acceleration. The weapons themselves were starting to feel like actual weapons rather than heavy toys that would hurt if they hit you. And maybe he did have a few fewer bruises than before.

**CLANG-CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!**

**CLANG—SWISH!**

But if that was true—and it wasn't just that he was in slightly better shape and so might be recovering a little faster—then John Diggle did know enough about fighting in general to recognize that his employer and partner-in-crime was taking it easy on him. Especially since he knew exactly
when it'd started.

Not that he wanted to talk about that. Not yet.

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!
CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!
SWISH!
CLANG! SWISH!

"Do you know anyone else that you'd recommend for this?" Oliver asked out of the blue.

Diggle blinked at him, only barely managing to block the hit towards his abdomen as a result. "What?"

CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!

"From your time in the military," the vigilante replied, varying his blows, blocks and dodges without looking like he was concentrating at all. "Then you were a bodyguard for a few years. You must've met someone that might be worth approaching."

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!
SWISH!
CLANG-CLANG!

Digg considered that as they traded several more blows, but instead of really trying to think of someone, he asked, "Why?"

SWISH! CLANG-CLANG! SWISH!
CLANG-CLANG! CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

"Because I'm starting to think Felicity needs protection, and neither one of us can provide it. Not all
the time," Oliver grimaced as he spun around, but that grimace was more for what he was saying than the stick that Digg had just barely missed his head with.

SWISH! CLANG-CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!

"You could, obviously," the younger man continued.

CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!

SWISH! SWISH!

CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!

"But it's not like I can pay you to—"

"Guard your girlfriend?" Digg interjected.

Oliver promptly knocked his legs out from under him.

The former solider hit the mat hard, muscle memory making him roll off the impact almost entirely on instinct; the grin he'd delivered the retort with never leaving his face. It was a small grin that felt a little strange after all the dark thoughts he kept circling through since learning Deadshot wasn't six feet under. Strange, but not exactly bad.

The archer scowled down at him even as he offered a helping hand up. "I went to check on her after Merlyn Global."

"I know," John answered as he accepted the hand and pushed himself up at the same time, half-shrugging once he was on his feet again.

Though he was a bit relieved that Oliver had transferred both his eskrima into one hand to help him and was now turning to snatch his water bottle off the nearby table.

"Remember? You texted me about her phone." He looked over at the training equipment off to the side at the same time as the archer, specifically at the recently replaced dummy, and shook his
head. "Still not sure how she even got it up there. I mean, she picked the tallest one. It's a foot taller than her. At least."

Oliver shook his head in agreement. "That's probably how she hurt her shoulder again." He grumbled, then took a few more gulps.

"Probably," John agreed as he grabbed his own sports bottle, downing some water himself, before he shook his head. "You mom knows you're seeing her, 'case you forgot."

Of course, he'd told Oliver that already. Because the fact that Tommy Merlyn and Laurel Lance had met Felicity had definitely interested the Queen matriarch. Even while she was apparently waiting for someone to attack the guest of honor that night.

When the younger man didn't respond, John added, "Might want to think about admitting you know her first name now."

"First..." the former playboy's scowl returned as realization dawned, and then he put his bottle back down before stalking back to the mats. He spun on his heel as John followed, bottle also left behind and fighting sticks already as ready as he could make them. "I'm not going to tell her that Felicity's the girl I was hooking up with when I first got back!"

**CLANG! CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!**

**CLANG-CLANG! CLANG!**

"Alright," John met blow after blow with a lot more ease than he had a few months ago. At least that much improvement was apparent. "And what'd you think she's..." he dropped down to avoid another overhead strike.

**SWISH!**

"...Think she's gonna think after you hire a bodyguard for a girl she's never met?"

**CLANG-CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!**
"I wasn't going to tell her," Oliver growled.

**CLANG! CLANG-CLANG! CLANG!**

"Yeah?" John snorted. "Just like you weren't going to tell her where you were running off to every day and night? How'd that work out for you?"

Oliver's only response was to up the speed again, the metal sticks almost whistling as they whipped through the air in between the clanging collisions.

**CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!**

**CLANG-SWISH! CLANG-CLANG!**

"Look, man, I get it. Felicity's the kind of girl, the kind of person, you don't want to let anything near," John ducked down again, this time to kick out at the vigilante's legs, but pulled back quickly when the sweep was avoided. "Doesn't mean she's gonna let you get her a bodyguard."

**SWISH! CLANG-CLANG! SWISH!**

"I mean, she doesn't even like *talking* about self-defense lessons."

Oliver actually growled again at that; a harsh huff of breath that sounded distinctly animalistic rather than a word.

**CLANG-CLANG! SWISH—**

**BAM!**

The ex-soldier managed to block two of the blows that flew towards him and dodge the third, but the forth struck where a nice bruise would soon bloom.

"She needs one or the other," the vigilante grumbled. "Or both." He waited for his sparring partner to find his balance on the mat before he started up again—yet another example of how much easier he was taking it on his pseudo-bodyguard of late.
The emotionally scarred but driven young man John Diggle had decided to help hadn't had the patience for giving anyone time. But he'd had to learn—or relearn—it, at least a little bit, with Felicity. After all, trying to intimidate her hadn't worked at all. Meanwhile, flirting had gotten Oliver farther, but also made it harder to ignore the chemistry that just seemed to be baking between them.

John would've kept an eye on them even if it wasn't sort of fascinating to watch. That didn't mean that he'd missed the fact that the archer thought he'd failed by not killing the sniper who'd shot Andy as he'd once told him.

SWISH-CLANG!

CLANG-CLANG! CLANG!

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

Not that Deadshot's continuing survival could actually be laid at Oliver's door. John had no doubt that the Hood had put an arrow in the sniper to keep him from completing his last mission in Starling City. Still, seeing those signs of remorse made it easier to accept the younger man's help. Even if the only help he was offering right now was in continuing unspoken apologies, implied promises, and a few less bruises here and there.

CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG-CLANG!

SWISH-CLANG-SWISH!

John snorted as he backed off. "I'm not the one you have to convince of that." He stepped off the mat then, deliberately stopping their sparring session before he asked, "What makes you think she needs a bodyguard?"

That someone had hurt her, apparently right outside their door—though she stubbornly refused to confirm that—had raised both their hackles. If anything, though, Oliver's protectiveness had increased even as she healed. And while John could understand the sentiment, the continuing growth was something he kept reminding himself to watch. In case Oliver went overboard, Felicity just freaked out, all the above, or worse; if there was a real necessity.

Oliver slammed his sticks down on the nearest free tabletop as he headed for his sports bottle again.
The same sports bottle that their I.T girl grinned at whenever she saw it, though they'd intentionally never asked why. John was pretty sure he knew. Learning after the fact that the man had been still in the process of recovering from a near-fatal Vertigo overdose at the time hadn't lessened the complete failure that attempted cover story.

"It was after midnight. When I got there, that night," Oliver finally started explaining. "I didn't even think she'd be up... but I wanted to check on her anyway." He gulped down some water, then shook his head as he went on. "She was just getting home. From jogging."

John blinked. "Jogging?"

Oliver snorted. "Said she had to 'clear her head,' so she went for a run." The sports bottle creaked a little in his grip, so he set it back down on the table. "Her house's only a few blocks away from the Glades, Digg. And she was running around there in the middle of the night."

Much as both of them would like to live in a city where a woman really could go jogging whenever and wherever she wished with the expectation of only losing her breath and some sweat, they didn't. Starling City was not that place. There were all too many places that were or could easily become the wrong place to be. And while any time could become the wrong time, the nighttime anywhere near the Glades was almost guaranteed to be bad. Maybe only a little less so with the vigilante occasionally intervening in muggings and putting arrows in thugs every now and then. Also something he'd only started because of Felicity. Unfortunately, that didn't mean most of the city's streets could be called safe.

Felicity knew that. If she hadn't, she should've learned it already, when someone cut her, whether she was willing to admit it or not.

John did have to frown at that himself. "Might be worth talking to her about, at least."

"I tried," Oliver scowled as he thought back on it. "She kept redirecting the conversation back to Tommy and me."

"She cares a lot more about everyone else then she does herself." John shook his head as he sat down. (On one of the spare chairs, not the especially comfortable computer chair neither one of them was supposed to touch.)
Oliver nodded, then added, "And she was dodging."

"Yeah, she does that, too," John acknowledged.

Because their I.T girl did have some secrets.

Then again, they all did. Something Oliver seemed to alternate between accepting or refusing to take into consideration, despite the years he wouldn't talk about being basically taboo. He was learning to be patient with Felicity, somehow, but John doubted he'd wait forever.

The billionaire sighed. "But she said she'll start taking lessons with you." He admitted, then chuckled. "And she mentioned she's pretty good at fencing."

John blinked again. "Can't say they taught that in Special Forces," he replied dryly, shaking his head. "Guess I could try watching *Pirates of the Caribbean* again, but if she's actually any good that wouldn't help much."

Though her having even so esoteric a martial skill in her background could go a long way towards explaining how she'd escaped some thug with a knife, and those times she'd manage to dodge around one of them unexpectedly.

"I have a little training with swords," the vigilante admitted, before he leapt up to start climbing his salmon ladder. The admission no more of a surprise than it was up for discussion as he threw his body into its next workout. "But it's not like she can carry a sword around all the time."

John nodded his silent agreement as he watched the younger man start the one exercise the former soldier didn't ever want to try. That ladder looked like an exercise in futility, whether it worked the whole body or not. Up, up, up, and down, down, down. Again, and again, and again. Just watching it on repeat, sometimes for hours on end, was irritating enough if John didn't make himself focus on something else. Give him a bunch of weights any day. And anyway; who the hell wanted to compare their body to a fish?

"I can, work with her, on that," Oliver continued in between jumps up the ladder, climbing more slowly than normal so that he could actually talk in between each thud and swing; though he was gradually gaining speed.
"But you'll—"

"Go over the basics with her," John readily agreed.

"Probably a—"

"—good idea," the acrobat approved.

John Diggle debated for a moment, then looked up again to watch the man for another few moments, till he reached the top all over again.

After he started back down, John finally asked, "So you spent the night, again, but you're not calling her your girlfriend. What is she then?"
Oliver stopped mid-motion on the bar, somehow locking himself in place.

Making the ex-soldier wonder (not for the first time) how one picked up notable gymnastic abilities while on a deserted island. So far all he'd been able to think of was that the former playboy might've taken to imitating Tarzan for some reason.

Then Oliver swung down, dropping back towards the cement floor, where he absorbed the impact with the cement in his knees, before answering as he stood. "We just watched a movie, Digg. Talked a little. Fell asleep on her couch. It was... nice." He sighed, shaking his head. "Tonight... It's probably a mistake—"

"No," John cut in firmly. "It's not."

"Maybe I shouldn't date her, Digg," Oliver argued with that frown that the older man had come to recognize.

That frown that came more from thinking about the past—his real playboy days much more so than the island he didn't talk to anyone about—than anything in the present or possible futures. It was about memories of how Ollie Queen had hurt Laurel Lance, even before getting her little sister killed. And memories of all the stupid stuff he'd done back then, in general, that'd made him so popular with the paparazzi and the tabloids.

What he didn't seem to get, as far as John Diggle could see, was that that wasn't who he was anymore. It was something Oliver had told others occasionally, but that didn't mean he completely recognized it in himself.

John raised an eyebrow at him. "Though you asked her."

"I did, but—"

"But,' nothing." John interrupted again. "Sounds like you're trying to talk yourself out of it now, and there are plenty more reasons for that to be a bad idea, Oliver." He shook his head. "Specially if you're really worried about bein' anything like the jackass you used to be."
The former playboy winced. "I don't want to hurt her—"

"Standing her up—"

"I wouldn't—"

"Or canceling at the last second's not a good way to avoid that," John finished firmly. "Why'd you ask her out in the first place?" He almost expected the younger man to blink at him in bewilderment, but when Oliver frowned instead, John frowned right back at him. "Oliver?"

Neither frown diminished as the blond shook his head. "She's been opening up more..." he sighed, looking away. "And there's something there... I just figured..."

"It was worth a shot," John nodded, understanding. "Maybe it is." He arched an eyebrow. "What's changed since last night?"

Even as he watched the younger man consider his answer for long than he probably meant to, John was still finding himself torn over missing that step. Because by not being here last night he could only take Oliver's words on whatever had actually led to them deciding to date. A potential problem not because it'd come as any kind of shock; the attraction between the two had been obvious from the moment he'd first seen them together, even with the pair trying to ignore it they looked liked magnets. No, the problem was it felt like it might've come too soon.

Too soon for the damaged man that John Diggle was still trying to figure out in some ways.

Though Felicity Smoak had proved more than once already that she could help Oliver Queen in many, many ways. The vigilante was lighter around her; amused and sometimes even happy in that way that John completely understood, even though he wasn't the one falling in love with her.

Too soon for the on-mission man who wouldn't seem to have the background that could've turned him into this soldier-like individual focused on righting his family's wrongs and saving their city. (Because whatever had shaped man and mission alike hadn't happened in front of cameras and summarizing tabloid journalists, unlike all of his life.)

But that light that Felicity had really brought into both their lives was like a balm against everything else they saw out there. In spite of all her secrets, her humor and good-nature helped
burn away everything. All the corruption and turmoil that in some ways had become the norm here in Starling City... and maybe that was what their city really needed to be saved from.

It still seemed too soon for Oliver Queen. The same Oliver Queen that'd planned to hide behind his old playboy image as some sort of expected master disguise. Who'd soon be opening a nightclub to perpetuate that cover.

*Verdant*, named for the color of his costume or not, was supposed to add to his playboy image, and in some ways it depended on it, too. So for him to start dating a woman a woman he'd presumably be serious about before said club even opened, *could* be problematic.

Not just because she worked with them and he'd *better* be serious about this. The gold-diggers and party-girls were one thing; if Oliver was an ass to them, John wouldn't feel obliged to at least try and give him a black eye. And Oliver most likely wouldn't feel obliged to let him.

Felicity was a bright girl. A very bright girl. And John didn't honestly think Oliver would ever want to hurt her. Nevertheless there were still plenty of ways this could go badly, and lead to a really awkward atmosphere in their hideout under the very soon-to-open nightspot.

"Nothing's changed," Oliver finally answered, shaking his head again. "But the mission—"

"Is all well and good," John interrupted, standing up mostly be back at eye-level with him. "But what about her?"

Oliver frowned, shaking his head slowly. "She said it's her choice." Somehow, he said that like it was a surprise.

"Her life, her choice? Yeah. Seems to be a mantra of hers." John shrugged. "Doesn't mean she's not right." He cocked his head to the side, hesitating for only a moment before deciding; the Hell with it, because letting the boy back out now wouldn't do any of them any favors. "Does saving the city mean we have to be unhappy?" He added quickly before the vigilante could respond, "Me? Felicity?"

Oliver's started nod immediately turned into a rough, negative headshake instead. "No. Of course not."
"Then why can't you be happy, too?" John shook his head when the younger man stared at him, though he wasn't sure the other man was seeing him. He was sure he was still listening though. "If she's willing to give it a shot, man, you should, too." He glanced at the clock the woman they were discussing had asked him to mount on the wall by the stairs early last week before all the craziness of assassination plots had started up. "And you'd better get going. Don't want to be late."

Oliver looked at the clock, too. "She just got out of work. Our reservation's for eight."

"Giving you plenty of time to go home, take a shower," John raised an eyebrow. "And admit to your mom that you're going on a date."

Oliver blinked, but thought it through before saying, "You think she might start looking into Felicity? Figure out she's been spending too much time here?"

John shrugged, "Yeah, on the first one. Who the hell knows, on the second. Either way, do you want your mom introducing herself to Felicity?" He asked, remembering the hopeful interest that'd blossomed on Moira Queen's face a few nights ago.

"No," the younger man replied evenly, then he sighed. "But Tommy told her, and—"

"And I had to give her Felicity's name," John interrupted, nodding again. "You already introduced her to Tommy and Laurel, man. It wasn't like I could lie and not risk that coming back to bite us."

"No, I know," Oliver sighed, slowly nodding. "And yeah, it's better if we try to control her...impression, I guess." He frowned. "I should probably mention that to Felicity."

"Yeah, probably," John snorted. "Not sure she'll be able to control her babbling when she's not in disguise."

That made a corner of the vigilante's mouth twitch upward. Then again, that was the affect most of Felicity's babbles had on Oliver. Apparently even in abstract. "She doesn't need to pretend anything with my mom," he shook his head. "If... this is going to work, at least this has to be something honest."

"Roger that," John approved, nodding again. "Which is why were you were going."
"Yeah. Okay." Oliver still hesitated a moment when he looked back at the ex-soldier. "You'll—"

"I already asked Turner to cover for me tonight, since your mom's staying in." John cut in, shaking his head when the billionaire blinked. "Having a driver'll help you avoid the paparazzi more than any of your flashy cars. And he might buy you some time by answering some of your mom's questions."

Oliver considered it a moment, his frown returning as he realized that this would essentially result in his whole first real date with Felicity being reported verbatim to his mother.

Felicity hadn't reported any problems at her day job in the few days that'd past since that eventful night. Oliver's mother hadn't come looking for her, or called her up to the office that Queen Consolidated maintained for Missus Queen. But that didn't mean she wasn't curious. If that curiosity hadn't translated to questioning Oliver yet, it was likely they had to thank whatever the woman was involved in. It didn't mean, however, that she wouldn't ask eventually.

"Thanks, Digg." Oliver nodded. He didn't move yet though. "What about you?"

"Little more exercise," John indicated the dummy he'd found Felicity's phone perched on top of a few days ago, shaking his head to dismiss the general confusion that still stirred. "Then I should stop in at Big Belly Burger. See Carly and A.J."

"Good idea," Oliver allowed with a nod as he visibly forced himself to turn towards the side entrance. "See you tomorrow."

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," John returned with a smirk, curious how the former playboy would respond to the normal ribbing. The friendly banter Felicity always liked to watch them engage in had been more for her amusement—and comfort—early on, but it'd grown on both of them.

So it wasn't a surprise that what he got back was a semi-amused smirk. What he was not unhappily surprised by, though, was that he could recognize that that smirk looked a lot like the small smiles Felicity seemed to surprise out of both of them, rather than the fake grins that the celebutant saved for the media and even, sometimes, for his family.

"Not sure we know each other well enough for that taunt yet, Digg," Oliver replied easily, as he
put on his leather jacket over the t-shirt he'd quickly shrugged back on before. "And believe it or not, I usually let the lady lead."

John's eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

"It was easier back then. Less work; something I wasn't all that interested in," the former playboy frowned that thinking-back frown. "With a few exceptions." He shrugged.

Then he grabbed the helmet he probably wore on his motorcycle more for concealment than safety—both as the infamous vigilante and the famous Oliver Queen.

"But I don't want to try much of my old playbook with Felicity." He said, shaking his head another time, still frowning.

John considered him for a few seconds, then smirked. "Yeah, she might slap you," he said it lightly, deliberately as he shrugged. "Or start laughing at you." He blinked as he realized he really wasn't sure which one it'd be. "Can't really tell with that girl all the time. Some of her reactions are..." he thought about it, then finished, "Outside the norm."

"Lucky for us," Oliver agreed, his frown deepening as he added, "I'd rather she didn't do the midnight jogs after leaving here. Obviously."

An idea hit him then, making John frown back. "That's not why you asked her, is it?" he raise a disapproving eyebrow. "'Cause somehow I don't think she'll let you be more protective even if you make it to boyfriend status."

The archer scowled. "That's not..." he trailed off, shaking his head slowly. "That's not why I asked her."

"Good." John nodded. "'Cause I'm pretty sure that might be a good way to make sure she called Detective Lance. Or hacks everything he needs to throw us both in jail onto his computer."

Oliver didn't give that a second's thought. "She won't—"
"I know, Oliver," the former soldier cut in, rolling his eyes. "Try not to piss her off too much anyway, okay?" John held his eyes for a long, pointed moment, then shrugged again. "You've already got one crazy ex-girlfriend that knows about all of this."

The vigilante made a face that was somewhere in between a scowl and a wince. "You know, we only went out on two dates. Didn't even finish the second one."

John snorted. "Yet before that bad 'second' you were showing her around down here. Helping her pick out a wardrobe and giving her hardware."

"You know that's not how it happened," Oliver sighed. "It was more complicated than that."

"Usually is," John shrugged. "At least we can be sure Felicity's not insane. Or bent on starting a gang war to get back at her father, uncaring of how many innocents would be in the crossfire."

Oliver didn't bother arguing anymore. His last attempt at a relationship, especially the woman it'd been with and the disaster it'd turned into could've easily become so much worse. Still could, since she was still out there. So that mistake wasn't really defendable. "Are you done?"

John immediately nodded; because Helena Bertinelli wasn't actually the point here. Anymore than attacking this man that was already at least something like a friend was. "Just keep in mind, Oliver; you don't want to hurt Felicity. Or piss her off, either." He smirked. "She won't turn us in, sure, but I think our tech girl's barely demonstrated just how dangerous her particular skills can be. And if you couldn't put your homicidal, criminal ex down, I doubt you'd be able to talk yourself into aiming an arrow at Felicity. No matter what she did."

"You're probably right about that," Oliver admitted, almost too quietly to be heard over the sounds overhead.

Not construction workers anymore; these were the decorators that Tommy had hired for the finishing touches. He'd kept on top of his job, prepping the club he was to manage for opening, despite everything that'd happened. Almost losing his dad and whatever was going on with him. Finding out Oliver was the vigilante... Still, he'd stayed on top of it all; done his job. Something that John had to admit, at least in his own mind, he was unexpectedly impressed by.

"Thanks," Oliver concluded with a respectful nod that the older man returned. "Enjoy your night off," he told him, turning towards the side exit again.
"Thanks," John replied, watching him till he rounded the corner.

The door opened and then banged shut a few seconds later.

Then John turned back towards the practice mats, heading for the new dummy.

There were several of the things down here, but this one was brand new. Very recently replaced after the vigilante had completely obliterated it. The whole thing, rather than just the arms, which they had plenty of refills for because that wasn't unusual. Oliver broke the limbs all the time. Sometimes John did, too.

*BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM!*

Then again, if Felicity had really reopened her still not fully explained knife-wound while climbing the old dummy and Oliver realized it, that did make more sense of the unexpectedly abrupt and violent end it'd come to.

It made John want to hit the replacement a little harder, too. Though, unlike Oliver, he was only attacking it with fists, feet, and some of his own limb lengths in between.

*BAM-BAM-BAM!*

It was also proof that those two pairing off would leave him at least a little out of the loop, and that almost made him regret requesting the switch with Turner tonight.

Only almost though.

*BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM!*

There came a point where this was supposed to happen.
Just because John couldn't justify telling Carly about any of this, that he didn't even really want to tell her, didn't mean Oliver and Felicity didn't have the potential to really hit it off.

And it was better if John wasn't there tonight. He wouldn't mind playing the part of his friend's bodyguard when that part needed to be played. Whether that friend was Oliver or Felicity. That was part of what he'd signed on for with all of this. Though hopefully shadowing Felicity, when they came back to that, didn't piss her off too much at both of them.

But he wasn't up for that tonight. Hadn't really been up for any of it since that night. Just that moment, really. When he'd learned his brother's killer was still out there. Somewhere.

Playing any role wasn't easy when his head was still spinning every which way.

BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM!

Plus, after 'tricking' his bodyguard into guarding his mother instead of himself, Oliver allowing Ricky Turner to drive them should hopefully calm his mother down.

John still felt a little bad for not somehow stopping Tommy Merlyn from unintentionally tattling on his secretive best friend. Only because that tattle could adversely affect Felicity. It was Oliver's fault, after all, that Tommy and Laurel had met Felicity and come to the assumption that they were dating already. Not that John could fault the couple for having eyes.

BAM! BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM!

Hopefully the switch with Turner would help handle Moira Queen by getting out in front of any belated reaction that might still be lying in wait. Any questions she had, after all, should be directed at Oliver, not Felicity, so giving her the opening of her driver taking them on their date tonight should get that ball rolling there. Whether Oliver confessed his plans beforehand or not.

BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM!

Besides, it was John's night off. They'd all agreed they were supposed to start taking those, and that extended to John pretending to be a bodyguard still.
It wasn't like Oliver couldn't look after himself, and Felicity, anyway. Apparently until she got her hands on a sword...which wasn't something he was thinking about anymore tonight.

Although thinking was what he really needed to be doing right now. Not about Oliver and Felicity and however awkward and/or perfect that might end up being.

About Andy.

*BAM-BAM-BAM!*

And Deadshot.

*BAM-BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM!*

Summarizing most of the thoughts after thoughts that'd been circling in his head since *that* night also, but that he couldn't really act on.

John still couldn't act. He didn't have anything to *act* on. But that didn't mean he shouldn't at least try to get his head back on straight.

*BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM!*

Felicity was looking for Floyd Lawton. John trusted that. Trusted her. Short time though they'd known each other. They'd saved Oliver by performing surgery and fixing the defibrillator. That, along with a bomb collar, a surprisingly successful undercover-op and everything else in between had bred trust, and the start of a friendship, too.

*BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM!*

And whatever Oliver Queen was hiding, John liked to think that he could trust the man with this. Since he did trust him with 'saving the city' outside the lines of the law.

With protecting the place he'd grown up in and come home to.
With protecting Carly and A.J.

John had to believe he could trust that when push came to shove the vigilante would help him find and bring his brother's killer to justice.

*BAM-BAM-BAM!*

It'd be easier, though, if John Diggle was sure that justice was what he wanted.

*BAM! BAM! BAM!*

Chapter End Notes

Probably not what you were expecting after the first scene, but even before a few people commented about uncertainty towards the date I wanted a lot of this to be said. And, you know, poor Digg was kind of sidelined for three whole seasons regarding his brother's death and murder, only coming up occasionally. Sure, we're seeing some more of it in S4, but that's another thing I'm not sure I feel like waiting that long for in this verse. And even though we only saw this come up in episodes as it was convenient for the writers, with it dragged out by Digg just not talking about it and occasionally looking for Deadshot or having Felicity look, with scenes from his P.O.V we kind of have to see the storm that must be brewing underneath. Hopefully I did it justice here, without putting either too little or too much of either the angst or the Olicity shipping. All that aside, S4 has been fantastic so far, hasn't it? For Olicity lovers especially, I suppose, but it's not like the shows all about that now. The whole team dynamic has shifted a little to a real team, Oliver included, and it's really kind of great. I mean, that flash-forward to the graveside is gonna torture me for the whole six months we have to wait for it, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It's a kind of interesting.

And I'm really not sure if I'd believe what Damian Darhk said about Andy. Even though Lance found those files separately himself, how do we know that Darhk's RAT didn't CHANGE the files TO THAT?

Obviously the next episode is gonna center around rescuing Ray, Sara recovering, and everything else continuing, but when do you think it's gonna be admitted that Damian Darhk is Felicity's father? I suppose it's possible that he's not, that the writers are really just playing with our heads entirely there, especially since Felicity didn't react to seeing his semi-blurry image talking to Captain Lance, but if that's the case they're dropping a heck of lot of false clues. Everything early on about her father being a genius like her, and a criminal. How badly he reacted to Anarchy tactic of taking Jessica Danforth's daughter. Even his confidence in his control of Captain Lance via threatening Laurel and, now, Sara. At this point, I'm kind of expecting it to be the mid-
season cliffhanger. But I could be wrong. What'd you think? About S4 and, obviously, Bloody Secrets, too?
More to come soon!
At this point, probably about once a week until we catch up with my stockpile of scenes closer to the end of the story... sometimes I really think my muses like torturing me. Little sadists... or would that be masochists?
...Never mind. I probably shouldn't put TOO much thought into the voices in my head, whether they're all talking about my stories or not.
Bye for now! :-(
First off, in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris, I'd like to express my sorrow for the people of France. I could start ranting and raving against terrorism in general and the kinds of rabid monsters that'd plan and/or carry out an attack like that in the real world, but I don't feel like wasting my words on them beyond that. My heart, however, goes out to all the people who were killed, hurt or terrorized by this tragedy, as well as to those who lost loved ones. No words or thoughts could ever really be enough, but that is all I can offer, so there they are...

Now, back to fan fiction:

Once again, I'm apologizing for the wait: Sorry, sorry, sorry! :-(

At least it wasn't a whole month though, and there was a pretty good episode in between there, too. An episode that kind of skipped over a lot, so I keep looking for fan fics to fill it in, but alas they're not appearing yet, and most of the missing stuff wouldn't be something that I could fit into my currently Season 1 centric fic, so you're stuck waiting with me...

Somehow, I still haven't finished editing Deadly Dances. I can't believe it even as I'm admitting it, but proof-reading those last few scenes and being one hundred percent sure there's nothing more I should've already added to them is proofing difficult for me. It's a very weird sort of writers block: like, it's transparent, so I can see what's on the other side but can't decide if I want to climb over the see-through wall to get to it...

I know, I'm weird. But you're still reading a product of my weird brain so apparently you don't mind.

Everyone who's commented so far has been wonderful, as always, but if you think of anything looking back on the last story, please tell me. Maybe it'll be the sledgehammer I need to break the wall.

If nothing comes to mind, don't worry too much about it (remember, I'm in the same boat). Just keep enjoying the story and, if possible, let me know what you think! :-)
This wasn't the first time since getting back that he'd just listened to them talk like this: just indulged himself in their unwary, carefree presence.

Except they weren't carefree.

The last time he'd listened like this, from this exact spot, his stepfather had been in there with them. And while Walter Steele—his mother's new husband, his dead father's old friend and coworker—wasn't someone Oliver had known enough to miss before, he did miss him now.

He missed that deep, refined voice that was supposed to be in there with them. That was supposed to be filling the void that Robert Queen's death had left behind.

The man that his mother was at ease with; could trust and take comfort from.

The man that Thea could turn to, even as a rebellious teenager, for a father's love.

The man that was more than willing to be there for Oliver, too, if he'd let him. That'd helped him at Queen Consolidated; even going against his wife a few times, for her son's sake, his stepson's sake. That'd helped him handle the legal system: returning from the dead, and then with Detective Lance and the S.C.P.D.

Walter Steele was always willing to help. Determined to, even. Because it was the right thing to do. That, Oliver was sure, was also what'd led to Felicity helping him and continuing to look for him now. Though part of that was the simple fact that that helpfulness as the very core was a trait she shared with the missing Englishman.

He didn't deserve whatever had happened to him. Whether he was long dead; murdered, or kept alive; a prisoner somewhere for who knows how much longer.

And, in a way, his loss—his absence from the Queen family—was even worse than the first father and husband they'd all lost. It was just as sudden. There was no indication of his survival, or if he'd be back soon, somehow, or gone years. But worse; he'd never really taken Robert Queen's place.

Oliver's father would forever be missed. Would forever belong in their world. In the world he'd
been forced to leave all too soon, thanks to a sabotaged boat. Sabotage that his mother knew about...

Walter was a band-aid over that wound. Maybe even a bandage. He helped them, all of them, heal somewhat. But under that bandage was a scar that was still more of scab; rough and sensitive and always there. And now that he'd been taken away, that bandage and scab was ripped up, too. The wound was all torn up and bloody; healing undone.

They were healing again. Slowly but surely.

Much more so his mother and sister than him, of course. For Oliver it was more wondering what he'd missed, what threat to his family had escaped his notice and thus taken his stepfather. And watching their pain.

Because Walter was still supposed to be here. A missed voice in that room. With the wife and stepdaughter that missed him even as they kept soldiering on.

Oliver shook the thoughts off, taking a deep breath, then he walked into the room.

Thea was partially facing the door, so she spotted him right away. "Ooh," she admired as she picked up the remote to mute the television. "What's with the fancy-fancy?"

From the opposite end of the couch, their mother looked up from their reading, turning slightly in her seat to look him up and down approvingly. "You look very handsome, Oliver."

"Thanks," Oliver answered their mother first, before looking at his sister. "I have a date," he admitted as he buttoned his suit jacket even though his mother's inspection was already over and he'd passed. "Contrary to popular opinion, I do have a life."

Both women looked at him for a moment, clearly curious, though Thea's curiosity was tinged with some sisterly amusement as she spoke up first.

"Then why do you seem so nervous?"
Oliver blinked, glancing down at the hands that were still hovering over his waistline, though the jacket had already been buttoned in a quick movement that was too routine to require thought. "Is it obvious?" he asked, dropping his hands to his sides as he made himself looked back at his amusedly smiling female family members.

"Just be your charming and brooding self," his smirking sister shook her head, rolling her eyes as she finished. "I mean, girls seem to dig that."

Oliver sighed, "This girl is... different." He shook his head, pretending not to notice just how closely both Queen women were watching him. "She didn't know me before the island, when I was..." he trailed off, shaking his head again. "She doesn't care about any of that."

"Is that good?" Thea asked uncertainly; every time she'd tried to talk to him about the five years he'd been missing, and everything he'd missed, in her eyes.

This was getting more personal than he was really comfortable with, especially with his mother still watching silently, so Oliver just shrugged. "It's why she's easy to talk to, I think," he smiled slightly as he finished. "That and her conversation style. She's... very honest. And she babbles." He couldn't say the last part without a widening of his smile, that both intently watching women noticed.

"That's good," Thea decided, smiling sincerely back at him. "I'm glad you're talking to someone."

"Yes," their mother finally spoke up then, a small smile also on her lips as she raised an eyebrow at him. "I don't suppose you know her name yet?"

Oliver winced, shaking his head immediately. "She's not... that girl, mom. I met her a few months ago." He hesitated a moment, then added, "She works at Q.C. Walter recommended her when I needed computer help."

All true, though it was also a very deliberate twist of those truths that neatly avoided vigilantism, gunshot wounds and everything else. Adding Walter's referral was meant to help with the fact that she worked at their family company. And it seemed to work, though their missing family member's name made both women flinch ever so slightly, some of that small amount of judgment disappeared from the Queen matriarch's eyes, which were slowly becoming more curiously calculating than disapproving.

"She works in the I.T Department?" Moira nodded slowly. "Yes, Tommy mentioned she worked at
Oliver met her gaze steadily even as his sister's gaze kept shooting back and forth between them. "We weren't." He shrugged. "We were trying the friends thing for a while."

"Wait," Thea was frowning now. "Tommy's met her?"

"I asked her to Tommy's birthday dinner, as a friend," Oliver confirmed, shrugging again.

"Wow... I didn't know you could move that slow," Thea mumbled, shrugging innocently when both of them looked at her. "What?" She raised an eyebrow at him. "It sounds like you haven't even slept with her yet." When he just kept looking back at her, not reacting, her other eyebrow joined its partner up by her hairline. "You haven't?"

"There's nothing wrong with taking your time, Thea," their mother chided her gently, some of that fading disapproval returning; this time to be turned towards her teenage daughter.

"Well, no, I guess, but for Ollie it's weird." Thea shook her head, completely ignoring their mother's frown and her brother's barely hidden amusement at it. Then her surprised shifted suddenly to amused consideration, making Oliver almost immediately wary. "She's not into the no sex before marriage thing, is she? Cause I'm pretty sure that wouldn't work for you."

"Thea!" The look Moira Queen gave her daughter now was scandalized. "That's enough." Her expression gentled, however, as her daughter subsided and sunk back into the couch cushions as she looked back at her son. "And does this exemplary employee have a name, Oliver?"

He let himself wince again. "She really doesn't want us dating to effect her career at all, Mom."

"And that's admirable," Moira approved, her expression staying expectant. "But I would still like to meet her." She looked thoughtful for a moment, so he waited for what was coming next, then she nodded. "Your club will be opening in just a few days."

Oliver blinked again, honestly surprised she'd let him put introductions off even that long. "Uh, yeah. Sure," he agreed. Hoping that didn't mean she'd go looking for Felicity at Q.C before the opening of Verdant.
"I assume she'll be there?"

"I haven't asked her yet," he replied honestly. It was something he had to ask about, and soon, but asking about another date before they'd even gone on their first seemed a little overconfident. And Oliver would like to think he was mostly past that phase. At least when it came to dating.

"No, that would be presumptuous, I suppose," Moira agreed, as if what she was expecting her son to say now wasn't. "Well, assuming all continues to go well, we shall see her here."

"Really?" Thea glanced between them again, her brows furrowing a little in incredulity. "That's, like, days away."

Oliver chuckled, "You'll live."

"But Tommy's already met her!" his sister complained indignantly. Then she blinked, her indignation giving way to what looked like shock. "Wait. You took her to Tommy's birthday party? With Laurel?" She blinked at him again when he just nodded. "Really?"

"Tommy indicated he and Laurel both liked her," Moira interjected, as though that was what had her daughter staring at her son rather than all the unmentioned baggage that came with Laurel dating Tommy now and all of them still being friendly.

"She didn't say anything at C.N.R.I," Thea scowled, like her sort-of-friend turned supervisor had intentionally denied her a treat.

"She's had a lot on her mind, Thea," Moira reminded her daughter, her expression darkening a little with worry as she looked back at her son. "How is Tommy, by the way? That night..." she swallowed, shaking her head. "That must've been horrible for him."

Watching her now, Oliver was again seized by the conviction that his mother couldn't want to kill Tommy's father. How could she? He was practically a second son to her.

*Please don't take me from my children! They've lost their father. They can't lose me, too...*
But... she knew.

Whatever his father's cryptic, nonspecific request of righting their families wrongs in Starling City was about, she knew what he really meant.

_I already told you that I knew Robert's yacht was sabotaged..._

If the Queen family was involved in something that affected the city as a whole, something that'd brought them great wealth and power at the expense of others before becoming something his father just couldn't stomach...

Well, Malcolm Merlyn would almost certainly be involved also. And he was always—or at least as far back as Oliver could really remember—more coldhearted than Oliver's own father ever was.

And he could kill. With brutal efficiency.

Yes, it was a clear case of self-defense. That he'd been protecting Tommy, and himself, couldn't be plainer in that security footage.

But since no questions whatsoever had been raised about it, obviously the S.C.P.D, for whatever reason, hadn't even bothered to ask for that particular fight's footage. Undoubtedly attributing it to the vigilante and not really caring about the deaths of two Triad hitmen enough to really look into it. At this point, though, it was likely that the footage wasn't there to be found. That camera wasn't working that night, the lens was dirty, the Triad cut the electricity to that region trying to affect the separate electric grid that powered the penthouse safe room... something like that.

The fact remained, though, that Malcolm Merlyn _could_ fight. Could kill as effectively as Oliver himself could...

So perhaps, from that perspective, Oliver _might_ be able to grasp his mother maybe hiring the Triad to kill Tommy's father and only really regretting it for Tommy's sake. It wasn't like Tommy and his dad were ever close, but still... she probably hadn't even expected him to be there that night, come to think of it. Why would she, all things considering?
"Oliver?" his mother's voice forced him out of his musings. "Is Tommy alright?"

Seeing Thea, too, looking concerned now made Oliver realize he'd been thinking much too long, so he nodded quickly. "Yeah, I guess. He's really thrown himself into getting the club ready to open." He shook his head. "Hasn't really wanted to talk about... that."

Thea wrinkled her nose. "You know, the suffering in silence thing isn't really that hot. Actually, it's pretty not. Not hot, I mean."

Oliver laughed shortly, "I'll tell him you said that."

"Good." His sister approved, then tilted her head sideways. "You still haven't told us her name."

Oliver rolled his eyes, but since his mother really already knew there was no point in not telling the both of them. "It's Felicity. Felicity Smoak." He glanced over at the clock on the mantel then. "And I've gotta get going. Our reservation's for eight." He turned back towards the doorway, but stopped when he reached it to look back at his mother. "Mom?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Could you, um, not give Felicity a hard time at work?" He asked clumsily, tacking on before her small frown could deepen. "Please? For me?"

His mother sighed, "You know, you really should be past the stage of not wanting me to meet your girlfriends, Oliver. But," she nodded regally, looking for all the world like she was the one born a Queen as she gave him a soft smile. "If it makes you feel better, I'll promise to wait until Saturday night."

"Thank you," Oliver nodded, flashing her his widest smile. It didn't come easily now, except around Felicity, but this particular situation seemed to call for it. "I've gotta go."

"Yes," His mother replied. "Ricky's waiting out front for you. Have fun."

"We won't wait up!" Thea shouted after him. "You know, just in case she stops making you wait!"
Oliver rolled his eyes, but he was still smiling slightly as he headed out the door, nodding to the driver that was waiting for him.

"Good evening, sir," his mother's longtime driver greeted him evenly as he held the door of one of the Queens' limos open for him.

"Good evening, Ricky," Oliver returned as he climbed into the car.

It wasn't the longest limousine the family owned, but like all the others it had the privacy glass that prevented pictures by the paparazzi of whoever was inside the car. Not of any help when they arrived at a public place they planned to get out at, but it give the option of choosing to just turn around if necessary. And for security concerns it was obviously much more effective, but none of them really liked riding around during the day, or really whenever they didn't have to. Still, there were times when it helped to have them, and if he was spotted at the club it'd be a good means of escape if it did make the hornet-like photographers swarm. At least then they'd only be able to sting along the walkway between the private club's entrance and the vehicle itself.

Hopefully, of course, there would be no photos at all involved. Or, if there were, it'd just be someone with a smartphone inside the club wondering who Felicity was. As was the case with how a photo of him and Helena had ended up in the tabloids despite the brevity of their real relationship. Or, you know, no photographs at all. But Oliver had really never been that much of an optimist.

"Digg tell you the address?" he asked as the driver climbed in up front.

"Yes sir," Ricky replied as he shifted out of park; not needing to turn the limousine on because it'd been idling in the driveway, engine hot and interior warm as it awaited its passengers. "Any other stops along the way?" When Oliver didn't answer right away, he recommended, "Missus Queen thought you might like to stop at the florist?"

"Right, flowers," Oliver snapped his fingers as he fought the urge to roll his eyes at his mother's meddling, even if it was the helpful sort. "That'd be a good idea," he nodded. "Do we have time?"

"Plenty, sir," his mother's longtime driver confirmed as he drove through the gates as soon as they opened enough for the limo to safely pass without risking the car; a mark of just how long he'd been driver for the family. "Missus Queen asked Sherwood Florist's to have several bouquets ready."
'Of course she did,' Oliver thought, but didn't let himself say. Instead he replied, 'I'll have to remember to thank her. Sherwood's, what, ten minutes out?'

"Maybe a little less, sir." Ricky answered. "Miss Smoak's home is only a short distance from there." Meaning they'd arrive with plenty of time for the pair to make it to the restaurant on time.

"Great." Oliver approved, ignoring the fact the driver already knew Felicity's name. While he may have learned it from Moira Queen, Digg was the one that'd briefed the man for the trip with addresses, times, etc. Considering quenching Oliver's mother's curiosity was part of all this—was, in fact, the only reason he wasn't driving one of the sports cars he'd inherited from his dad or the handful he'd bought for himself over the years before *The Gambit*—it just wasn't worth worrying about.

Ricky Turner was, of course, a competent and reliable driver. He wouldn't have lasted seven going on eight years as Moira Queen's primary chauffer if he wasn't. That Digg had been able to push him around as much as he had—even getting him to take some sick days so that the bodyguard could 'cover'—was more of a surprise to Oliver than his smooth, steady hand at the wheel could ever be.

*Sherwood Florist* was the flower shop his mother, along with most of Starling City's elite, had been loyal customers to for as long as Oliver could remember. All of the bouquets that Raisa regularly ordered to fill the house, and the additional ones for special occasions all came from the same shop that Laurel's great grandmother had started back when the city itself was first forming.

That shop was one of the reasons the Lance sisters had been able to attend the same schools as a Queen and Merlyn growing up; while their father was a beat-cop that eventually made it up to detective, now a sergeant, their mother came from some money. The renowned flower shop passed down to her mother, and her father a known name in banking. Neither ever anywhere near billionaires, but easily able to support their granddaughters through school even in their golden years, probably with a considerable amount of money left to the former Missus Lance when her parents died; both before Laurel had graduated from high school. So the sentiment she might attached to flower arrangements was something he understood even then.

None of Oliver's grandparents were still around to see him enter high school. His paternal grandmother dead to cancer years before Robert met Moira and her husband barely hanging on long enough to see their wedding. Both of his mom's parents were at that wedding, and occasional visitors when he was growing up, too, but neither one was still around by the time Thea was born.

Oliver could remember stopping here more than once as a child. His mother explaining that every
flower had its own meaning and thus bouquets were not necessarily just pretty, fragrant decorations, but messages, too. Not that the language of flowers had really interested young Ollie back then, when he'd rather visit his father at the office and get a soda out of it, or even when he'd started to be interested in girls. He could remember his mother stepping in like this more than once though; especially when it came to Laurel.

It'd irritated Oliver a little as an independent teenager (that at least semi-rebellious stage that Thea was in right now), but even teenage Ollie could appreciate it from time to time, too. After all, even with her mother being a law professor and her dad a cop, odds were that the Lance girls' grandmother had taught her granddaughters a thing or two before she died, so those 'messages' might be something Laurel was looking for in flowers. The standard, expensive bouquets worked for things like those early dates, dances and each prom, but the ones that effectively said 'sorry' every time he screwed up—sometimes sent without him even knowing of it till she called to thank him for them—went a long way towards helping Laurel forgive again, and again, and again. And again; many more times over.

It'd been enough of a staple of their so-called relationship that he'd almost gone with Slade's sarcastically offered suggestion that he show up with flowers for her. But somehow stopping at the flower shop that now belonged to her mother to buy flowers to say; 'I'm sorry I cheated on you with your sister and got her killed' didn't seem like a good idea. It probably would've gotten him much worse than the harsh, burn-in-hell response his flowerless apology had gotten him.

Still, remembering all of that, it wasn't at all surprising that his mother had told Ricky to stop for flowers along the way. And Oliver supposed he could be glad, at least, that she was at least letting him pick. Though that likely had more to do with the fact that she hadn't even met Felicity and knew next to nothing about her, more anything else. The wide array of extravagant bouquets that were waiting for him when he got there, comprised of many more types of flowers than one would generally expect to find mid-March, clearly displayed that.

But knowing what a few flowers meant wasn't much help here. Yes, he knew some of the messages they could supposedly say thanks to those childhood lessons, but said lessons had never made much sense to him. Not when many flowers had multiple meanings and the receiver was somehow just supposed to know which one you meant. Felicity had never mentioned what her favorite flowers were, why would she? So all he could really do here was guess. Roses seemed safe, which was probably why they were incorporated into more than half of the already prepared bouquets. She favored vibrant colors in her wardrobe when she wasn't disguising herself; contrasting bright pinks with vivid purples. So he picked the collection of pink roses that had something purple added to them, all artfully centered around one big red rose in the middle that reminded him of both the red pen she'd been chewing on that first day he introduced himself in her office and the red lipsticks she tended to wear that also always reminded him of that pen.

It was as Oliver was leaving the florists, however, that something else caught his attention. Not by sight; there were so many flowers crammed into the little shop even in the wintertime that just picking something by sight from all around wasn't really an easy task. No, he didn't spot the flower
by sight; his nose noticed it.

It was the same smell as her shampoo. The same smell that filled her candlelit apartment, from what he'd seen, every night. The softly sweet, floral scent that made him think of sunshine. Of Felicity.

"Mister Queen?" the head florist, Bethany, was quick to come out from behind the counter as he stopped, halfway to the door. "Would you like something else?"

Oliver ignored her and the girl that was also hovering just behind her for a few seconds, slowly moving towards the scent with careful steps as he sought its soft aroma out in between the many more punchy, bold blooms that tried to distract him, till he was standing front of a big bouquet of little white flowers that looked like stars on their dark green canopy of leaves. "What is this?" he asked, stepping to the side so the two florists could see what he'd stopped for.

The younger girl blushed, but said nothing as her supervisor smiled and nodded approvingly.

"Jasmine," Bethany answered immediately. "One of our more exotic treasures. Not the easiest blossom to grow in this climate, even in the greenhouses, but it's a beauty, isn't it?"

Oliver nodded, glancing at his watch before he handed the flowers he'd picked a moment ago back to her. "Can you add them to this, please?"

"Of course, right away," the woman agreed, her cheerful eagerness—even in the face of staying open a few more minutes after already staying open hours later than their normal closing time just because Moira Queen had asked her to—likely having a lot to do with mentioned difficulty growing the added flowers. There weren't any prices listed on many of the bouquets; if you had to ask you probably couldn't afford them, but 'hard to grow' here and 'exotic' both meant they'd cost more than most. Not that any member of the Queen family would notice or care.

"You know, jasmine's said to be one of the great aphrodisiacs," the blushing teenager—that'd probably stayed late at her after school job just because she heard he was going to be here—finally spoke up.

Oliver gave her a small, amused smile that only made her cheeks turn even redder, her soft voice apparently leaving her again as her supervisor replied.
"Yes," Bethany agreed lightly as she wove the collections of star-like flowers in among the pink and purple blooms, the red rose still precisely centered. "That goes back to Cleopatra being the first known to use its perfume. Hold that, Jennie," she directed, going on with a shrug as her young coworker obeyed, helping her by holding some of the bigger flowers in place while the little white ones were woven through. "Maybe there's some truth to it. It's used in countless perfumes, after all, but I don't know how much stock I put in that sort of thing. There we go," she smiled widely as she finished, starting to rewrap it in all knew fabric even as he handed one of his black credit cards back to the younger florist.

Oliver was still headed out only a few minutes after he'd gone in, Ricky getting them back on the road towards Felicity's home with plenty of time to spare. He spent the entire drive there contemplating the flowers rather than the time. Trying to remember when the last time was that he'd bought flowers for someone himself.

Obviously it was before The Gambit went down. Before that entire trip and everything surrounding it.

Had he even bought Laurel flowers in the months before that, though? He didn't think so. The flowers for Valentine's Day Raisa had handed to him as he was leaving the mansion for that disastrous date. The last bunch he could remember picking at Sherwood's personally was for her birthday. In November. Almost a whole year before The Gambit...

Maybe that was why Oliver didn't want to set this bouquet down? He used to think nothing of tossing the collections of flowers on the seat next to him, or sometimes dropping them on the floor as he drove or was driven over to Laurel's. After all, what did it matter if they lost a few petals?

Staring at those delicate little white flowers though, with their soft, light but heady aroma already filling up the inside of the car, Oliver couldn't bring himself to put them down any further than his lap. It seemed as stupidly sentimental as Slade had thought him gazing constantly at Laurel's picture was, back before burns and madness had taken his brother from him. But it felt right, too.

The limousine stopped in front of Felicity's home only a few minutes later, as promised, but even though they weren't even close to late Oliver had to make himself sit still, waiting impatiently, as Ricky rounded the vehicle to open the door right in front of her walkway.

"We'll be right out," Oliver nodded to him as he went by.

Another thing he wouldn't have bothered with before. Respecting 'the help.' Raisa was really a special case for both the Queen children; in the practical sense she'd been the one raising Oliver,
and Tommy, for most of his childhood, and then Thea, too, years later. But almost everyone else may as well have been invisible most of the time. They'd always been there, doing their jobs; what they were paid to do, so what was there to thank them for? After his five years 'away,' however, it was sometimes harder *not* to say thank you when it'd seem out of place. Or out of character... and no, he didn't like what that said about his supposed character.

Oliver didn't get the chance to knock on Felicity's door this time, she opened it before he'd set foot on the steps. For a second he stopped and stared.

Green.

His green. She was dressed, head to foot in a glittery green dress. A dress that under all the shimmering and glitter was the exact same shade as the hood.

Felicity smiled widely, visibly pleased by his stunned appraisal when most women would be waiting for him to find the right words. "Are those for me?" she asked, an edge of laughter in her voice that made him smile in response.

Oliver swallowed, then made himself climb the steps to finally hand the bouquet over. "Of course," he replied, making himself swallow again when the words didn't come quite as easily as they should.

"Thank you," Felicity nodded dutifully, her smile stretching as she looked the gift. "Jasmine," she approved, her eyes dropping shut as she buried her nose in the flowers and breathed the scent in, her nose angled towards the little white stars rather than any of the roses. "My favorite."

Oliver nodded slowly, a little amazed by the feeling blossoming in his chest. It seemed odd to feel so *proud* at just figuring out what her favorite flower was. But, watching her entire face light up as she saw the bouquet—as she closed her green-shadowed eyes a moment to savor the smell—that was what he felt.

That didn't mean that he missed that her dark green eye-shadow could be the real make-up equivalent of his grease-paint. It, too, was that exact same shade of green.

"Come in," Felicity waived him inside, turning towards her little kitchenette. "Let me just put these in water."
"Sure," Oliver agreed easily as he followed her, stopping in the her tidy, sweetly scented little living room as she grabbed a glass vase out of the shelf over the refrigerator. Wondering as he watched her fill it with water and free the flowers from their confines to carefully place them in it, if she was mocking him or just wearing his colors for the same reason she had an arrow in her ear. Though *that* he couldn't actually see, with her hair not up in her typical ponytail her ears were hidden by those long shimmering waves of gold draping down in a lavish fall around her head and shoulders.

Felicity stepped back from her counter to consider the arrangement for a moment, then nodded in satisfaction before she turned and walked back to him with another wide smile. "All set," she approved, stopping in front of him and then pressed a kiss to his cheek so quickly he could only blink at her as she did it. "Thank you."

Oliver swallowed again before the perfunctory response, "You're welcome." He replied as he looked her up and down, offering her his arm by rote even as he realized that she was several inches taller thanks to the shoes she was wearing, which were also green, their pointed toes and very high heels the same dark shade as his arrowheads. "You look gorgeous." He dutifully remarked, better late than never.

"And as expected; you are devastatingly handsome in a suit," Felicity shook her head as she gave him the same once over, wrinkling her nose playfully as she met his gaze again. "And you already know about the problem with my mouth, so if I say something it's entirely your fault."

Oliver chuckled as she looped her arm through his, "And yet you're the one in green tonight."

Felicity laughed, "I thought you'd like that." She slipped her arm free as soon as they reached her front steps again.

Oliver waited patiently while she closed and locked her door, immediately offering her his arm again to help her down the steps and the brick walkway that those heels might make dangerous. So he reached out to steady her automatically when she suddenly stopped; her spine stiffening for barely a second that he wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't paying attention to her every step. "What's wrong?" he asked, frowning down at her—even in the ridiculous heels he was still several inches taller than her—as she forced a small smile in response.

"Nothing," Felicity shook her head, glancing down the street as the roar of a motorcycle came down the street a little ways ahead of the machine itself. "Sorry. I just forgot to do something at work," she shrugged slightly. "I'll just have to remember it tomorrow morning. We should get going. We might be late. I wouldn't actually know, would I? Since I don't have any idea where we're going except that it's Italian."
"We'll be fine," Oliver replied, continuing down the path. But now his eyes were on the biker; because he'd pulled into the driveway across the street before killing the engine and dismounting, taking his helmet off as he turned towards them.

"Good evening, Nick," Felicity called politely as the man started walking closer.

Oliver frowned as the other man gave her the same appreciative once-over he himself had a minute ago, though his irritation subsided a little when the motorcyclist didn't leer, only raising an eyebrow at her. Trying to place the man who was obviously her neighbor by his first name and address, but not putting two and two together until the light of a nearby streetlight glinted off of the badge by the gun at his waist.

Detective Nicholas Cassidy. Newest member of the S.C.P.D's major case squad; who'd specifically requested the transfer to the vigilante taskforce. And Felicity's newest neighbor of a few weeks now.

"Evening, Felicity," Nick nodded back to her, then nodded to Oliver as well. "Mister Queen."

Oliver nodded back, resignedly used to being recognized by complete strangers. Even if they had just recently moved to Starling City, the story of Oliver's return from the dead had been national news for at least a few days last fall. And any new detective on the vigilante case would've had to read up on the only man ever arrested but not charged for the vigilante's crimes thus far. He stayed quiet as Felicity spoke up again.

"Oliver, this is Detective Nick Cassidy. He works with Detective Lance. Nick, you seem to already know this is Oliver Queen." She paused, then asked lightly, "Any luck on the case?"

"Nothing new," the detective snorted. "You probably would've heard before me, if there was. Most tips seem to go to the news stations before the cops these days." He shook his head. "Where are you off to?"

"I have no idea," Felicity answered honestly. "We'll be eating Italian food tonight. That's all he's told me."

"Didn't think you liked surprises."
"There's exceptions to every rule." The blonde shrugged. "I also know our reservation's for eight, though, and I'm not wearing a watch but that's sometime soon, so we'd better be going. Have a nice night, Nick."

"You, too, Felicity." Detective Cassidy replied, the slight smirk he'd given her falling before he nodded to him again. "Mister Queen."

"Detective," Oliver nodded back again, before helping Felicity slide into the backseat of the limo via the door that Ricky had been holding open for them since they reappeared on the steps. As he climbed in behind her and Ricky shut the door after him, he thought about the detective he'd just met—now one of three detectives he'd met who was working directly on 'his' case—but decided there really wasn't much to say.

Obviously Felicity had better hearing than him, though; if she'd heard that motorcycle coming a few solid seconds before him. And, just as obviously, she'd known it was her motorcycle-riding neighbor that happened to be an S.C.P.D detective working to put them behind bars. If Oliver was going to say anything about it, it'd have to be a question about if the detective's proximity was problematic enough to merit moving, but that wasn't something they should be talking about on their first real date.

"You don't have to worry about Nick."

Apparently she disagreed.

Oliver didn't answer as Ricky climbed in up front and pulled back on the road, once again not needing to turn the car on because he'd never turned it off. "Let us know if there're any problems, Ricky, okay?"

"Yes, sir," the driver replied respectfully once again.

"Thanks," Oliver replied, before hitting the button to close the partition that'd give them privacy, checking to make sure the light wasn't on for the speaker system before he looked at his date again. "You don't think he'll give you trouble?" He raised an eyebrow. "Even if he sees your earring?"

"Nick's harmless, Oliver," Felicity reassured him, sounding so completely confident that he
couldn't help staring at her. "Really, he is."

She sounded sure about that. Surer than she really should be considering the man legally carried a gun around and was part of the task force in charge of arresting him, and maybe her and Digg with him. Not to mention she'd only met the man a few weeks or so ago. But he didn't have any reason to doubt her judgment either.

Oliver gave her a small smile. "Might want to make sure he doesn't see your earring anyway."

"Oh, he's seen it already," Felicity shrugged as he blinked at her. "He thinks I'm openly mocking him." She nodded, then smirked slightly. "Which I guess I kind of am."

"And here I thought you might be mocking me," Oliver smirked at her.

"Would I do that?" she replied, all wide-eyed faux-innocence as she grinned at him, her eyes especially bright because of the dark shadows and mascara that was framing them in place of her usual glasses.

"Yes," He kept smirking right back. "I seem to remember you comparing my mask to make-up more than once."

That made her roll her eyes, "You don't have a mask, Oliver. You have eye-shadow aiding real shadows. And it can be defeated by a flashlight or one too well-lit room."

Oliver sighed, glancing at the unlit light that confirmed the intercom still wasn't on (trusting that light because it was something Digg had already checked out earlier in the day just to be safe), then met her gaze again. "Then find me a mask that doesn't affect my ability to aim while I'm on the run."

Felicity blinked, then looked away, her waves of golden hair glimmering with the movement and again when she looked back at him. "You've tried fabrics that conform to your face?"

"Cloth moves."
"More leather?"

"Too thick," Oliver shook his head. "Blocks my peripheral vision."

"Your peripheral vision inside the hood."

"The hood's not—it's far enough away that I still have peripheral vision as long as I keep moving, which is when I need it; to aim." Oliver tried to explain. "It's limited, but not unworkable. Adding a mask limits me even more; to practically tunnel-vision."

"And tunnel-vision is bad, literally and figuratively," Felicity nodded slowly, "So the mask has to conform closer to your face?" she barely waited for Oliver's nod before going on. "I'll start looking into compressible fabrics—"

"Later," Oliver interrupted, reaching up to catch her chin and gently turn her head back towards him, holding her gaze as she blinked at him. "We're not supposed to be working tonight. Remember?" he smirked at her. "You were very clear about that on the phone. I got the message. Digg did, too. That's why we stole my mom's driver."

"No," the blonde rolled her eyes again, shifting to tug her chin free as she went on. "You stole your mom's driver because you and Digg are being over-protective. Again."

"We're not—"

"Oliver," she interrupted him firmly, her gaze incredulous. "You're trying to protect me from your mother."

"You're welcome."

"No, I'm not thanking you, because it's silly," Felicity insisted. "Even if she—"

He put a finger to her lips then, glancing towards the thankfully still unlit speaker button, then nodding towards the front.
"What? We can talk about make-up and masks, but not your mom?" Felicity asked dryly as soon as he dropped his finger from her glossy lips.

Oliver held her gaze a moment, then sighed. "What happened to 'no work tonight'?" He watched her eyes drop shut as she sighed too.

"You're right," Felicity answered softly, opening her eyes to meet his again. "I'm sorry."

"No," Oliver shook his head, his smile as gentle as he could make it; though that wasn't hard when she looked so crestfallen. "This is...new. For both of us. Not talking about 'work,'" he nodded, his lips quirking a little when hers did, too, at the word. "That's what we've usually talked about, so..."

"We're going to slip back into it every now and then?"

Oliver nodded, "But let's keep trying, okay?"

"Okay," she answered softly, voice still a little tremulous. But at least she was still meeting his eyes; not looking away.

Oliver searched for a new topic that wasn't related to 'work,' half hoping the car would stop at the restaurant soon. Give them both the break of the walk inside and then the menus to hide behind for a bit. But if they were where he thought they were—the windows were great for privacy but made it impossible to see anything outside at night—then they still had at least a few more minutes to go. "So... why's jasmine your favorite flower? The smell?" he asked, adding the last bit because the question felt weak, but he was quickly becoming fond of that soft, sunny scent himself.

Felicity's prettily painted face shifted, becoming lighter and yet sadder in response. "Yes." Her small smile was definitely sad, her eyes distant as she thought about it. "It reminds me of my mother. So it... it means home to me."

Oliver frowned slightly, not sure he wanted to keep pressing when the topic seemed to sadden her. But she was still smiling a little, and he didn't understand why thinking about her mother would automatically make her sad, so he asked, "Your mother?"
Sure, Donna Smoak and her daughter didn't seem to talk a lot, as far as he could tell. In fact, Felicity had only mentioned her once from what he remembered; most of what he knew about the cocktail waitress that'd raised her in the city of sin was from his background research into Felicity herself. Considering part of her paycheck did go to the woman every month though, it seemed unlikely that they were anymore estranged than the distance between Starling City and Las Vegas created naturally.

"Yes," Felicity nodded, her eyes distant as she went on. "Jasmine was her favorite, too. She had it planted all around the pal—place. All around our home. The green vines and leaves crawling up the garden walls, white blossoms blooming everywhere all summer long..."

Her smile wasn't just sad, he realized as he watched her now: it was fond, too. Remembering.

"They grew up around the doorways and the windows, too. The scent seeped into everything... so that even when it was too cold, I could still smell them everywhere. I used to fall asleep to that smell, every night." She finished fondly, shrugging. "So I notice, when it's missing..."

Oliver was smiling slightly as she trailed off, able to relate to fond memories of childhood. But then he realized that what she was saying didn't really add up with what he already knew of her, and frowned in confusion. "In Vegas?"

From what he understood, Felicity had lived with her hardworking cocktail waitress mother until she graduated high school early, then traveled across the country to M.I.T. Her father was never in the picture. But Las Vegas was pretty much the same climate as Starling City, so... He just wasn't sure how an expensive, exotic, and 'hard to grow in cold climates' plant could fit into that. Not the way she described it. Not even exaggerated by fondness for something from her childhood.

"What?" Felicity blinked, then shook her head slowly. "No..." she answered just as slowly, biting her lip a moment, then explaining. "I was adopted, actually... Donna Smoak she... she wasn't my birth mother."

"She wasn't?" Oliver repeated, because the nonspecific clarification was the only response he could think of when faced with the realization (again) that his so-called 'background' check of her had pretty much been useless. So it really was a good thing she was both harmless and too good a person for even him to doubt that.

"No. My..." Felicity swallowed. "My first mother she... she died..." She closed her eyes on another painful looking swallow, then finished. "A long time ago."
"I'm sorry," Oliver winced again, the appropriate response falling from his mouth automatically, but nonetheless sincere.

"Don't be," the blonde shook her head hard enough to make her long hair rustle around her shoulders with the abrupt motion. Then she swallowed one more time, before forcing a smile as she met his eyes again for just a moment before looking away. Remembering again. "It's good to remember. It'll always hurt, of course, but it's not like I'd ever choose to forget her. Memories are all we really have left of loved ones, once they're gone."

"That's...true," Oliver agreed slowly, maybe unconsciously mimicking her patient pace as he studied her, wondering what it was just then that made her seem so...

Wise? World weary? Maybe a bit of both, but something else, too.

She was bright and beautiful. Always. Those were her norms; both words fitting her oh so well in more ways than one. In just about every way those particular words could fit someone.

But sometimes there was something more there. Something... fascinating. Maybe not quite the right word, because that was more the effect than the quality he couldn't accurately name in his own mind as he watched her think about a loved one lost; her eyes clearly seeing into her past as he watched her in their present.

Because it was easier just to focus on her; to let himself be drawn in. Even though Oliver knew she was right, contemplating the past (and the future) like that had never been something he cared for. Not on the personal level.

Strategy and missions were one thing, just like studying someone's history was a key part of determining how they should react to having an arrow aimed at them. But getting bogged down in doubts towards the future or regrets from the past was still something Oliver tried to avoid as much as he could. It did mean that thinking about the fallen—Akio, Slade, Sara, Shado, Yao Fei, his father, and far too many others—was something he only really did with a strong drink in hand. Or, more than once since coming home, in the nightmares his subconscious haunted his short sleeping hours with.

"But I'm the one that should apologize," the spell broke as Felicity's face fell into a rueful smile. "We're supposed to be having fun tonight."
"No," Oliver shook his head firmly. "I asked." He continued as she just looked at him again, answering seriousness with seriousness even though he'd rather see her smile and laugh and babble again. "And we're really supposed to be getting to know one another, right? Now I know you were adopted and your biological mom was a green thumb." That surprised a burst of laughter from her, and he returned her smile with a nod.

Though he was starting to wonder if Ricky might be lost. Or had just taken them on a pretty massive detour. Like all the way around the city instead of straight to the restaurant.

"What about you?" Felicity asked, her tone significantly lighter as she smiled again, her eyes brightening a bit more as she asked, "What's your favorite flower?"

Oliver blinked, then laughed himself. "Can't say I've ever thought about it," he admitted with a shrug.

And he really hadn't. Even with Laurel's grandmother owning the city's leading flower shop, it wasn't the sort of thing Ollie ever thought about personally. He associated flowers with girls. Laurel's favorites were lily of the valley paired with alstroemeria—a bouquet he'd bought her pretty much every other week after they'd graduated high school till that Valentines' disaster. His mom liked snapdragons or some kind of orchid (he could never remember which one, but he'd never had to order it himself either, the florists always knew which one he was talking about if he asked for it). Thea had always liked red roses, so the whole flower language thing just had to be ignored if he was buying them because **that** was one of the few he did know...

When she just kept expectantly watching him again, that teasing smile staying in place, Oliver laughed again. "Jasmine's growing on me."

The amused admission made her smile widen, her laughter never leaving her eyes. "Well then, you have excellent taste."

"I think you might be a bit biased," Oliver grinned at her, raising his hand to indicate with a hand gesture, "Just a bit."

"Maybe," Felicity allowed with a playful shrug. She seemed to be shrugging a lot tonight, but then maybe he just noticed her shoulder movements more since she'd been hurt and so seeing her shrug without wincing was now a good thing. Then she smirked just as playfully. "Of course, you're kind of named for it, too."
Oliver blinked again, then shook his head. "My middle name's Jonas. Not Jasmine."

"Yeah, but jasmine's the queen of flowers."

"Thought that was roses?" he shot back, pretty sure he'd heard that at some point. Probably from Thea, considering how much she liked them; and she'd been in a flower phase when he'd left on *The Gambit*. Didn't seem to be now, but the bouquets Raisa had all around the house for most of January had all had red roses in them; a good indication that they were still her favorite even if she'd grown out of wanting flower patterns everywhere, too.

"Only since Queen Victoria," Felicity shook her head. "Jasmine ruled long before that. Before Cleopatra."

Oliver's lips quirked towards a smile again. "They mentioned that in the flower shop," he told her, one eyebrow rising. "Said she used it to seduce Caesar?"

"Actually, her using it on Antony was better known," Felicity shrugged again. "I think. Sure, she brewed perfumes and oils along with all her poisons, but her sailing down the Nile with jasmine scented sails on a boat full of flowers was probably its most open use as an aphrodisiac."

"An aphrodisiac," Oliver repeated amusedly. "That you use to wash your hair and in scented candles around your house?"

She just laughed, also smiling in amusement still. "Don't read too much into it. That didn't end so well for Caesar or Antony. Besides, you're supposed to be the great seducer, aren't you?" she shrugged yet again, smiling as he smirked. "And a lot of people just like the scent."

Oliver nodded, smirk shifting towards a smile. "So I should get my mom and Thea to make it the family flower? 'Cause Thea might fight me on it if she still loves roses."

"Oh no, Oliver." Felicity shook her head. "Jasmine's your flower. You're the one that's named for it."

"My mom and sister are Queens, too," he pointed out, then watched her shake her head again, still
"Yeah, but you're the one that's named for it." She said again, going on insistently before he could decide to ask anything in response. "Because it's an olive."

"No, it's a flower," Oliver replied, a little uncertainly because he really didn't know, but the little fragrant flowers the florists had added to her bouquet hadn't looked anything like olives to him.

"It's an Oleaceae. The olive family. And the queen of flowers. Ergo," Felicity gestured to him with a smirk. "Your floral namesake, Oliver Queen."

He thought about it a moment, then told her, "You can never tell my sister that."

It was as she dissolved into laughter that the limousine finally found the restaurant. Ricky opened the door on Oliver's side only a moment later, with her bright laughter still echoing around the billionaire as he climbed out and turned back to offer her a hand.

Felicity accepted his help, restraining her amusement to only a smile as she nodded her thanks, climbing from the car and perching atop her heels with all the grace of any super model he'd ever dated. Her balance never seemed to waiver, she didn't stumble on the carpet the club rolled out every night to where their clients were dropped off, accepting his help but not once seeming to need it.

"Queen, party of two," Oliver introduced himself unnecessarily as the maître d met them barely a few step from the doorway, his nod almost a bow.

"Right this way, Mister Queen."

Chapter End Notes

Well, the date's started! And I'll even promise, up front, that I have no plans whatsoever to blow up the restaurant in the next scene, which will be the date continued! Other than that, I may pull from some of the later season Olicity stuff more, but I'll obviously keep pulling from Season 1, too. Oh, and I found most of the stuff about jasmine on Wikipedia and a few websites about Cleopatra. If anyone who actually knows the many different kinds of jasmine
and olives better would care to correct me, I wouldn't mind. I was kind of fudging it, because I thought it was funny. I don't know if any plant actually produces jasmine flowers and olives for its fruit. In fact, I think they're two completely separate types of plant that just happen to be in the same scientific 'family,' but I could be wrong, and it was a close enough relation for my muse to point at it.

Let me know what you think!

More to come soon!
The Date Ends

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: You know, I'm not a stupid person, and I know myself pretty well as a writer, so normally I know I should listen to myself when it comes to outlining and the like. Sometimes, however, not so much. Case in point: Why did I initially plan on the date taking place later in the series? I, yes, because there'd be more build up to it, etc., etc. But more importantly? I knew it would take me a long time to write it, so rather than shoving it into one of the stories it could've been its own little side-story in between there. But, no, I had to let Oliver take over at the start of the story here, didn't I? *Sigh*

For what it's worth, I'm terribly sorry of the wait, everyone. Combined with my writing handicaps (namely almost never liking what I start off with), and some of the curveballs thrown by S4, this chapter was a bit of a nightmare to write. I hope it came out good, because at this point I'm too sick of it to keep revising.

Enjoy! (I hope)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity ignored all the eyes that were following them as the maître d’ led them across the respectably busy restaurant. Most of Starling City's present elite possessed enough polished politeness for at least the pretense of pretending they weren't watching, but of the half dozen or so that didn't wear well-bred disguises of disinterest, only two were adults who should know better. Then again, both of those two were women, and Oliver did look very nice in that suit.

All the same, it was an effort not to show any strain as their guide stopped at an immaculately dressed table. That was almost smack dab in the center of the restaurant. Thereby putting them perfectly on display for at least seventy percent of the other patrons.

Oliver caught her elbow before she could step towards the proffered chair. "I hadn't realized the club no longer considered its clients' requests relevant." The billionaire's tone was mild, but his eyes were a little too hard for the carefree playboy persona he was still supposedly supposed to be hiding behind.

Felicity didn't say anything though. Either in relief at his pointed intervention or worry that he might let the only real mask he had—that of his youthful, carefree reputation—slip more often than might be wise. Here wasn't the place to try and point such things out. It also wasn't necessary. This restaurant was one of those premiere places that catered to only the city's elite. One of the places that Oliver would've frequented all his life until a boat sank him away from all of that. Whatever
image he wanted to portray, she had to trust that he knew what he was doing here.

The tuxedoed older man immediately folded into an almost-bow, apologizing in the same quiet tone so that only the most intently listening nearby eavesdroppers might hear. So that none of the conversations of those few that were either oblivious to the Oliver Queen's arrival (or those who simply didn't care) would be bothered as he turned to lead them towards a different table. Not surprising; the restaurant certainly wouldn't want there to be any indication of Oliver Queen finding their service lacking even before the island, but after? Well, his castaway story had made his name known for at least a few moments all the way around the world, even among those that couldn't care less about celebrities. With everyone knowing that he'd been away from civilization for five years in conditions that most people probably couldn't imagine, his lack of satisfaction with one of Starling City's most exclusive (and expensive) club's could do a lot more damage than the fact that he'd chosen to bring a date here in the first place could ever hope to repair.

The firm but quiet reprimand showed more respect for both the restaurant and the fellow patrons than most might expect from a playboy. Even if many of those pretending they weren't watching would probably prefer if they could hear what he was saying. It was a show of class that would, hopefully, go a long way towards making the man he'd almost been glaring at forget just how stern the supposedly carefree man's stare could be. Not that the maître d' had gotten an actually taste of the Hood's glare; just a hint of it. Nonetheless, it was the sort of thing Oliver really shouldn't want anyone talking about if he wanted to stay off the S.C.P.D's radar. All the same, under the eyes of so many customers, causing a confrontation with a famous guest would just be stupid, so of course they had their way without any difficulty at all.

Even on a Wednesday night, the club's restaurant was more than half full of those that could afford it. Every table almost certainly containing at least one person Oliver should recognize. While not the only 'elite club' in the city, this was one of the most exclusive. Not just because it's pricey meals meant it catered only to those who didn't particularly care about prices. Before that there was the need for a membership to just get in the doors, too.

*Aesdomus* wasn't a place the Immortal had planned on visiting anytime soon. Certainly not in *this* lifetime. The sort of lifestyle that afforded such luxuries wasn't one that any I.T girl's salary could support, not without such wealth explained by something other than her career. Exactly the sort of thing she'd been avoiding for a good few years now, and that wasn't the life she'd chosen to lead in this city.

She could have, of course. If that was what Felicitas had wanted this time around, she could've come to Starling City as a woman of considerable wealth. The heiress of some anti-social tech titan that'd recently died. Or the techie-daughter of some other wealthy, social recluse. Or a princess, duchess, or countess of some small country that everyone would pretend they'd heard of before.

There were more than a few places that she could use that'd even be legitimate enough to pass
almost any inspection. Places where she had been royalty, or at least nobility, at some point in time. Places that were part of why she did have a lot of real wealth hidden away around the world.

Well, that and the number of times dying mortal friends chose to leave her some portion of their fortune—generosity that tended to bother her even when she didn't think it was intended as charity. It was hard enough, sometimes, to stomach accepting the loss of a loved one, without profiting from it. She'd acquired more than enough real wealth over her millennia of life, and even if she didn't have various treasures hidden around the world and impressive bank accounts under various names at her disposal, she was more than good enough with computers to just fake it if she wanted to.

But that wasn't the life she'd planned for this time around. Before the first time she saw her vigilante's smiling eyes, she was usually content with the simple ease of a day job that was predictable and occasionally a little challenging.

All the same, Aesdomus was a name she'd recognized on the elegant sign outside as Oliver guided her towards the double doors that were probably pulled open as soon as the billionaire stepped out of the limousine. She recognized it from her research. She always tried to plan wherever she might be going next. In fact, she already had a few places lined up, if necessary, much as she'd hate having to leave at this point.

Research was usually how she chose those places. Where she could be going next. If she found any indication of another Immortal having already taken up residence somewhere, even a friendly acquaintance, she preferred to avoid infringing on their space. Major cities were one thing; it was amazing how many Immortals managed to just miss each other most of the time in places like London or New York, but they did. But there were plenty of places she could claim for herself without stealing from someone else who should wield a sword, so there was rarely any reason not to limit herself to only short visits to the places that didn't qualify. Beyond that, it was just too easy these days to justify not doing the research. From restaurants to businesses to entertainment and residences.

And she hadn't moved here in a hurry; she'd started her time as Felicity Smoak at M.I.T, after all, so she'd had plenty of time to decide where she'd be going next after graduating again: the only real limit being she couldn't accept offers from anywhere that any of her fellow classmates were going to. Not any of those that'd spent enough time with her in Massachusetts to wonder how she could afford really good plastic surgery on an I.T girl's salary. She'd found more than enough online about this place to know that the life she'd chosen in this city meant that the only ways she might be getting into this particular club were if her brother decided to follow her here as a much less economical individual (something they'd both occasionally done to each other), or if she met someone who was a member, like Oliver.

To even get in the door one needed a membership or a member's invitation. And while it was likely
none of the Queen's had ever had to wait for their membership, this place did have both a waitlist and bi-annual meetings where it was decided if anyone on the waitlist should be let in even if none of the members had recently died without bequeathing their memberships to their heirs. If a potential new member couldn't afford to bribe the board, then they needed a friend that could, or enough influence to sway them without financial incentive. It was the sort of thing that supposedly kept out 'unsavory elements,' but in reality it was just another example of elitism not unlike the others she'd seen through the ages.

After all, while some of the younger Oliver Queen's many scandals were likely hushed up by his family's money, there were enough of them that made it out to merit a rehash by the media following his miraculous return from the dead. Yet it was highly unlikely that Robert and Moira Queen's son was ever threatened with losing his membership. Then again, those scandals—along with the more recent publicity surrounding his return, later his arrest and more recently Thea's—were probably part of the reason that more than a few interested eyes were watching Oliver follow a woman they didn't recognize across the room.

When it came down to it, he was a Queen. And the local press didn't dub his family the city's royalty just because of their last name. *Queen Consolidated* had been the city's leading employer for the whole of Oliver's lifetime. That fact alone would wield power in Starling City even if it wasn't also where his family's sizable fortune had come from.

It was why their rejected table was one of the ones that everyone else could see, but also why the tables were initially spaced so that all of those watching couldn't also eavesdrop easily. An illusion of privacy while on display.

It was also why Oliver shouldn't have brought her here *on their first date*.

Felicity didn't let those thoughts show though, anymore than she'd reacted to his glare being a bit too hard a moment ago. Instead, as the now slightly nervous head server stopped at another table, she nodded her thanks as he held her chair out for her. "Thank you," she said as she accepted her menu with a smile for both the servers that was just a little too bright; and a little too direct as she caught the eyes of both tuxedo clad men for a few seconds too long.

Too much, she knew, for any of the wealthy wives and heiresses around the room that maybe didn't even see the staff after a lifetime of such service. And too much, also, for the models here with wealthy men who could afford their smiles. But she wasn't either of those typical types, and didn't want to be. Neither role was who she'd chosen to be in Starling City.

Actually, Felicity had constrained herself to very little acting and begrudged societal constraints this time around. In times gone by there were certain roles that'd *had* to be played. Back then the difference between success and failure was a lot closer to living or yet another death. When being
the one served, rather than the server, meant more than just luxury, but security and safety, too. Most of the time anyway.

Over the last few generations, though, some of those norms had expanded, and others had been completely—and sometimes very violently—discarded. So being the quiet, helpful girl that just watched for a while had seemed like such a good idea. One that she'd stuck to, perhaps for too many decades.

Until Oliver Queen smiled at her. Sure, she'd stuck to her rules at first, for the most part. With each and every one of his requests, though, she'd become more curious. More invested. And then Walter vanished when she was helping him... something she probably shouldn't blame herself for, but she did. And so the time for quiet curiosity past, all doubts about curiosity leading to trouble being put down by the simple fact that she had many more lives than any cat could spare.

That hadn't meant acting, though, even when she'd finally gone to Oliver. That quiet, caring, helpful girl was so much a part of who she was anyway that she hadn't had to change when she risked trusting her instincts again. And those instincts—the same ones that'd had her setting cautiousness aside in the face of each of his strange requests, following through after only the slightest of challenges sometimes—had been right.

Maybe that was why even more truths kept slipping out so easily around Oliver? Because he'd already broken the thin frame she'd fitted herself into, and the only thing to do in response was to just go with it? Talking so much about her first life when he'd asked about her favorite flowers wasn't like her. But Oliver had managed to very pleasantly surprise her with a bouquet containing them, and once again more than she should've said had slipped out.

She knew it was partially why Oliver's interest in her meant so much. Whether it was based in proximity, availability and protectiveness on his side, or not. That he was attracted to her, when she wasn't going out of her way to play any specific part, meant a great deal on its own. His many attractive qualities—the impressive drive that he refused to recognize even as it was what drew his teammates to him, along with his desire to help—were just icing on the cake. His absurdly attractive face, that physique that'd draw eyes even if he wasn't semi-famous, and the charisma that'd made him a successful playboy before were the candles lit on top.

"Thank you," Oliver echoed as he accepted his own menu, probably only after giving the new table a cursory once-over just to make the maître d’ sweat a few seconds longer. Though when her eyes went his way, his smile was aimed at her.

Would how handsome he was ever stop surprising her?
"So," Felicity made herself say as she dragged her gaze away from his bluest of blues and back to the artfully, priceless crafted bill of fare in her hands. "What's good here?" she queried without opening the leather bound booklet just yet.

"No idea," Oliver admitted, tilting his head instead of shrugging, probably because so many people were watching them.

The Immortal had to wonder if that sort of thing was just instinctive to him or if he actually had to think about it—and which was born of his luxurious childhood versus his half decade without luxuries? Such acting was a constant stream of thought for her; much more so if she was truly playing a part rather than just going with the flow to fit into the ever-changing world that'd changed so very much from her first lifetime. After all, both her ancient childhood as a petted, privileged princess, and the obligated life of prestige as the queen regnant she'd had to grow into all too soon, didn't truly translate directly to anything in the modern world.

But the most valuable lesson Methos had taught her early on was the need for adaptation. A key aspect to humanity's success as a whole, but also the only way in which any ancients could still really be around today. Learning to live on when all around you the world was changing as most people died and new people were born, making the world anew, with each generation remembering only the bits and pieces past down to them by their fore bearers. An invaluable lesson even for mortal, but especially for Immortals: one that some—too many—were unfortunately incapable of learning. Though some stayed safe in their sanctuaries, never changing, that wasn't truly living.

"Haven't been here in five years," the former castaway admitted, eyes on the menu now when she looked at him. Then, after a moment more of thought, he added, "Almost six, actually."

Felicity almost wanted to ask him why he'd decided they should come here then. If only so she could stop alternating between the various interpretations of what his reasoning might be.

The security concerns weren't hard to recognize. Oliver had only been out to dinner with the mobster's daughter twice before their picture hit the tabloids. The fact that their brief relationship had, according to Digg, crashed and burned that same night of little consequence to the media. So the lack of potential paparazzi exposure here was probably a plus in the vigilante's mind. Though no formal restaurant would allow photographers inside to disturb their diners, the private club made it even more difficult. Especially with the actual security guards at the doors; sure, they'd acted as doormen for her and Oliver, but that was because they'd recognized him. The odds of any paparazzo getting in at all were next to nothing. And the elitism of this particular place should, in theory, keep the other diners from reaching for their smartphones.

The problem, though, was that same ambiance. This wasn't a nightclub or a cute little restaurant with just a few other diners. This was the height of sophistication. And though Felicity knew well
how to play the part if needed, she wasn't sure if that was what Oliver really wanted. She wasn't sure if it was something she wanted. Because even if no one took their picture together, it would at least become a topic of conversation that Oliver Queen had been seen here with some unknown blonde.

Did he want that? Or had he just overlooked the statement this made for the sake of the security? Or maybe she was over-thinking this?

Sure, she'd dressed nicely enough to avoid being recognized by any of her *Queen Consolidated* coworkers even if any photos were taken tonight. And her selection of attire, while intended to tease her date, should also lead most to assume she was a not-yet-well-known model or actress. Assumptions that were safe to allow. If it made the tabloids and things didn't work out between them, she'd be as Oliver was photographed with another woman. Sooner, even. As soon as the next piece of juicy gossip swam into the ever swarming sharks the tabloids kept fishing and whipped them into yet another feeding frenzy.

If their relationship kept progressing, however, the fact that Oliver had chosen to bring her here; to a club that catered exclusively to the city's elite, could be seen to imply he was a lot more serious than his playboy image should lend anyone to believe. Because if he'd grown out of the partying playboy phase, why was he interested in opening a night club? It wasn't like he especially needed the money and so was falling back on 'what he knew' out of necessity. While the questions wouldn't necessarily be asked of Oliver himself, they'd be out there. And even if somehow it wasn't gossip-rag fodder, bringing Felicity here placed her on the same level as any of the heiresses around the room, and that could have far too many prominent people wondering who she was and why he was dating her.

That could lead to questions.

It *would*, somewhere in the not so distant future, lead to paparazzi ambushes and tabloid articles fabricating stories or dissecting their relationship like it was anyone else's business—because that was the business of the professional gossips—and the Immortal really wasn't sure if that was actually what Oliver wanted. Never mind what she wanted; her own mind was much too confusing all on its lonesome to be sure.

Though the possibility of Methos finding out her new budding relationship status that way couldn't be ignored. Because even if he pretended he didn't indulge in gossip, which he did, they shared too many friends that would recognize her even if most mortals wouldn't. And far too many of them would call her brother before her. Over talkative traitors, the lot of them.

That, however, would come from her dating anyone with any notoriety whatsoever in this age. Her picture would be taken. It'd be out there. With Oliver's. Linking them together. Not something
Felicity minded, per say. Mastering computers as they came into being was something she and Methos had both initially set out to do as a means of control that they actually had down pretty good these days. Even if her picture made papers—or, more precisely, the digital versions that passed for them these days—the fame would pass faster than paper documentation had. And she had programs in place already that made sure such images and mentions of her on the worldwide web were never entirely accurate to start with, and would cease to even exist out there in due time, whether it was the publisher's normal policy or not.

But had all of this come from the man across from her wanting to get closer to her just to get closer to her, or more to protect her? Felicity hadn't missed his carefully massaging hands checking her shoulder. Or his comments about her jogging habits. So she couldn't help but wonder if that hinted at a step forward from protectiveness or for the sake of the dance's next step...

*Could* this just be that Oliver had realized he didn't want to be alone anymore? That he'd been alone for the last five years, and unable to commit even before that, and maybe he wanted to try anew now? With her?

Oliver turning the page of his menu pulled her out of her circling thoughts, and Felicity tried to shake those thoughts off as she finally actually read the menu she'd opened probably too long ago to be missed, but Oliver was either absorbed in his own thoughts or willing to pretend he hadn't noticed her occupation. But looking at the elegant cursive, she had to blink a few times.

Not because she couldn't read it. No, despite her ancient dislike for the Roman Empire, she'd learned their language long ago. And all things considered she'd never had a real reason not to add Italian to all the other tongues in her repertoire, too.

Then again, the Italians were not really the descendents of the ancient Romans in any direct sort of correlation. The peninsula that'd once been the heart of the Empire that destroyed her home had fallen to conquest itself many times over since then. Not that she hadn't realized, long ago, that Methos had been right not to have much sympathy for her dislike of the Romans back then. He'd tolerated it in Hannibal's time, when the Romans had defeated him and completely destroyed the city that'd once been her home. Even if it'd been almost seven centuries since she'd left her first life behind. But she'd known back then that he was right. That it wasn't wise to openly oppose Rome back then, when it was becoming the power in the world. Though it'd taken her a full century to accept it, she had eventually made herself pretend to be a proud Roman, and had thus become one of the few Immortals who'd once met Julius Caesar upon the slippery marble steps of Rome.

Regardless, if her mind were monolingually confined to only English, it wouldn't be a problem here. Each of the items came with a succinct summary meant to wet the pallet underneath all the mostly non-English names. What had her studying the lengthy list of options in surprise was the fact that English and Italian weren't the only languages therein.
"Well, they used to serve Italian here," Oliver finally broke the silence, his slight discomfort at the unanticipated alteration almost disguised by his smile as their gazes met again.

"There's some Italian here," Felicity pointed out with an easy shrug, deliberately rolling her shoulder slowly so that he could see—if he was looking for it, because he probably was—that doing so caused her no pain. "Bruschetta al Pomodoro and Spaghetti alle Vongole are both Italian... so's the Isalata Caprese. And they have Spaghetti with Meatballs—if you wanted American-Italian."

"You don't have to order Italian, Felicity," Oliver chuckled as he told her.

"No," The blonde agreed, still smiling with some amusement. "This menu's much more eclectic than that." She cocked her head to the side, "Do you think the chef changed it to justify visiting all the food capitals of the world, or did the restaurant just change chefs? Or maybe they have a bunch of chefs battling by the stoves back there? Like on Top Chef?"

"I have no idea," Oliver answered with another light laugh. "But it sure looks like they were trying to put a bit of everything on here."

"Hmm," Felicity hummed her agreement, then wrinkled her nose. "I'm not sure I like the concept. I mean, sure, in theory it tries to cater to everybody at any time. But it's kind of... I don't know. Generic?"

Oliver raised an eyebrow at her. "We haven't even seen any food yet."

"True..." Felicity allowed, deciding not to point out the fact that they could see the food all around the room; everything mild enough that no strong scents were disturbing or tempting that that hadn't ordered them. "So what are you in the mood for? I'm game for anything, as long as it's no longer moving. And not a snake. Or an insect. Of any kind."

"Don't see any bugs or snakes here," Oliver observed, "'No longer moving' is an interesting requirement." The inquiry in his tone almost hid the furrow of his brow.

Felicity ignored the former, focusing on the latter. "Maybe," she replied softly. "But I'm sure you had more than enough hunting and cooking yourself these last few years. And they're supposed to do at least the kitchen part here. Whether they're chef-knife-fighting back there or not."
Oliver was quiet for a long moment that she waited through without looking at him, studiously reading through the many different dishes that they could order for their dinner. When he spoke again, his words were a little too even. Too controlled. "Is that your way of asking me about the island?"

"No," Felicity shook her head automatically, eyes still on the entrees. "That was my mouth talking without the permission of my brain. Somehow without mentioning sex—Oh wait, there it is." She sighed, knowing her cheeks were at least pink as she once again found her mouth running away in that direction with this man. It was like, deep down, she just didn't want to lie to him, even by omission... actually, maybe that was exactly the problem?

His chuckle was surprised but sincere. Still, it was another long moment before he said anything. "I don't want to talk about Lian Yu, Felicity," he told her, still totally controlled, but the same warmth that'd been in his chuckle was there, too. Dimmed by the mentioning of that island's ominous name, but there nonetheless. Which told her how much he was still hurting. Not that she didn't know that already.

"I know," Felicity answered calmly, meeting his conflicted gaze again. "Doesn't mean you don't need to. Doesn't mean you won't want to... And when you do, I can listen. Or talk," she flashed him a soft version of her bright smile, "You know I'm good at that."

That made him crack a smile back at her, almost managing hiding how his right hand had started to look like it was wondering where his weapons were. So he really didn't want to talk about the Island. Not unexpected. Though she was a bit surprised that he seemed to feel threatened by his very thoughts of the place. Even—or maybe especially—when the questions were from someone like her: who knew he hadn't spent the entire time there working out while waiting to be rescued. As his archery skills were ample proof, because unlike his sister he hadn't studied archery (competitively or otherwise) before that boat sank. She'd checked. Then there were the scars... and everything else.

"We could try the chef's choice?" Oliver suggested a long moment later, his more mild tone much less indicative of painful past events.

Felicity glanced at the first page of the menu, which she'd initially skipped over because the elaborate setup was sure to be the most expensive option here even before any alcohol was added in. The whole inside cover, which displayed a carefully worded description that didn't actually tell you what you'd be eating if you ordered it. 'Tastes from around the world,' as it was called, could mean almost anything. All the chef's best, made from the very finest ingredients. Which almost made it sound like the rest of the lengthy menu wasn't the best or made from the finest, but that was probably unintentional. It also promised to match to your personal tastes, despite the global
adventure it'd take your tongue on at the same time. Making her wonder if the chef was some sort
of super-human or just crazy. All of it without any listed price, just like the rest of this menu. There
was also an optional wine pairing, of course, which permitted one to choose between red or white
wine.

Felicity still almost rejected it out of hand, a necessary inclination of this lifetime, but then
reconsidered. She tilted her head to the side as she glanced at her still tense date. "Is that what you
want?"

Oliver shrugged, looking for all the world like he couldn't care either way. And maybe he couldn't.
"It'd probably give us the best idea of what they serve here now."

"Okay," Felicity nodded slowly. Even though a tasting menu didn't tend to be the same thing as a
sampler. What they'd eat, after all, wasn't really what tonight was about. "'Tastes from around the
World' it is, then," she agreed. "Are we getting the wine pairing, too?"

"Sure, why not," Oliver closed his menu and set it on the table with a shrug. "You prefer red,
right?"

"I do love red wine," Felicity confirmed with a small smile that twitched towards a smirk when the
words visibly registered on his face, but the waitress arrived before he could remark on it.

"Good evening and welcome to Aesdomus," the redheaded woman greeted them with a
professional smile, trained well enough at least not be staring as the handsome, famous man at the
table. Though the precise way she was speaking might be to cover her nervousness, since she
sounded American to the Immortal's time-trained ears. Down to the decidedly incorrect
pronunciation of the restaurant's Latin name, which was probably exactly how the owner wanted it
pronounced; incorrect or not. "My name is Angela, and I will be your server this evening. May I
start you off with some refreshments?"

"I'll have a scotch, neat," Oliver replied readily.

"Just water for me, thank you," Felicity told the redhead, tilting her head when her date frowned at
her. "You said we're getting the wine pairings, too. It'd be silly to order more wine on top of that,"
she pointed out, and Oliver nodded his understanding.

Their server smiled as she glanced between them. "Then you've chosen the chef's tasting option?"
"Yes. We'll have the 'Tastes from around the World' for two, thank you," Oliver replied. "With the wine. Red wine."

The redhead's nod wasn't quite as much of an almost-bow as the head server's had been, but it was close. "And what shall we be cooking for you this evening?"

That made Oliver frown slightly. "Doesn't the chef decide that?" he asked, his tone all but saying 'isn't that the point?' Apparently not having read as far into the fine-print size cursive near the bottom of the page as Felicity had. Maybe his mother should be glad he didn't want anything to do with the family business...

Felicity didn't let herself frown at her own thoughts, though it took a moment of effort before she could start talking evenly. "I think she means preferences, Oliver. Or allergies, I guess? Stuff like that?" she interjected mildly, pretending she didn't see the slight furrow that'd started to try and form between the girl's manicured eyebrows smoothed over her diffident smile. "Well, for me, no nuts, please. Red wine, like Oliver said. And I'd prefer chocolate in the desert course, if possible."

"What about bugs and snakes?" Oliver asked, a definite note of teasing in his tone as he smirked at her, ignoring the confused blink it got him from the waitress, promptly covered by professionalism's mask, but there for a second before that.

Felicity rolled her eyes as she handed over her menu. "Well, I didn't see those anywhere in there, but yes, I'd prefer to avoid being that adventurous, too, please." She confirmed, and then pretended not to notice when the young woman waited for Oliver's approval.

In this supposedly pro-feminist era an Amazon's outrage might be dressed up as politically correct, but there were times and places for such things and this was neither. Not when Oliver was both the club member here and the one paying. Any politics, past or present, would only be an unnecessary, tricky tangent. And no more what their first real date was about than the food was.

"Sounds good, I'll have the same," Oliver approved with a chuckle as he handed the redhead his menu, too.

"An excellent choice," the girl approved, as if she could say anything else. "I'll be right back with your drinks, please let me know if you need anything at all."
"So you really love red wine?" Oliver smirked as the redhead departed, that definite glint of teasing still in his eyes.

"I did tell you that," the Immortal reminded him.

"Right," He winced. "I still owe you that bottle, don't I?"

"No." Felicity shook her head. "You only promised me a bottle of ridiculously expensive wine if you won the case of it. Obviously you didn't," she shrugged, meeting his gaze steadily. "You were a bit busier than most of the idle rich."

The billionaire blinked at her. "Felicity...there was no scavenger hunt," he told her slowly, like he was surprised he had to tell her.

She rolled her eyes. "I know that, Oliver."

"I promised you a bottle of wine," the man maintained, frowning. "And I meant to give it to you. I just...forgot."

Felicity didn't let her eyes roll again, but she was grinning slightly as she replied. "You 'forgot' to give me a bottle of wine worth much more than I make in a year if you're buying it at a particularly competitive auction?" she went on before he could answer. "The sort of thing you shouldn't give me, anyway, because it begs the question: Why would you give it to me?"

Oliver shook his head, "Because you helped—"

The Immortal cut him short, speaking far too softly for anyone other than him to hear her, careful to keep her face fixed pleasantly so that it looked like they were just talking about the typical stuff couples would chatter about on first dates. "An answer that the S.C.P.D's task force could actually swallow, so that it shouldn't lead to my arrest as an accessory to who-knows-how-many crimes?" She shook her head slowly, smiling as she started to continue, but stopped herself when she saw the waitress out of the corner of her eye, returning with their drinks.

"And here you are," the redhead smiled as she set the scotch in front of Oliver and the water in front of Felicity, obviously deciding to forego the unspoken invisible help role in places like this, since they'd both looked at her when she arrived. "May I get you anything else for the moment?"
"No, thank you, Angela," Felicity replied, responding to the woman’s surprised look with a polite nod. A clear dismissal, but not one that'd have the waitress badmouthing Oliver's mystery date if any tabloid reporters did start sniffing around here. She watched the woman leave again after Oliver had shaken his head. When the young woman was out of earshot, Felicity looked back at him again. "Don't worry about the wine, Oliver. I really don't care about it nearly enough to risk exposing either of us."

The real risk, of course, was to him. He was the actual vigilante, and the one that'd already been investigated for being the vigilante, charges hurriedly dropped or not. But he was also too stubborn to back down out of concern for himself, so reminding him that she was working with him now and therefore somewhat at risk if he was caught was the easiest way to make him let it go.

Oliver sighed, but nodded as he reached for his scotch. "Fine." He took a sip without looking at her, but his eyes met hers as he put the tumbler back down. He studied her for a moment, his eyes appreciative, then he finally said, "I like you dress."

"I know," Felicity smirked, though it became more of a smile after only a moment. She shook her head. "You seemed surprised?"

The vigilante nodded slowly. "Wasn't expecting you... in my color." He nodded towards her as he finished, then admitted, "Maybe I should have, after that earring, but yeah, it still surprised me."

His surprise surprised her a little. Yes, her selection of attire for the night, from her dress to her make-up had all been a conscious, deliberate choice on her part. But it didn't seem like something that should've really surprised him.

Demonstrating loyalty through one's choice of clothing color was hardly an unknown principle. It'd been a practical, practicable staple of societies around the world since coloring cloth was first conceived. As it was no longer limited by expense, or legalities in most places, it was pretty much a non-issue these days, but that didn't mean it wasn't something everyone who was paying attention recognized. It was the same concept tying together soldiers by their uniforms and sports fans in far less exacting uniformity when supporting their teams.

Then again, maybe it shouldn't surprise her at all. As keen an observer as the archer could be when it came to combat, and his mission in general, this proved it was debatable how much he consciously noticed such things in his everyday life. After all, his picking out her favorite flower by recognizing its scent in relation to the candles and soaps she still had shipped to her from what remained of her first home had surprised her. Very pleasantly so. So perhaps it'd be best to just set aside assumptions when it came to Oliver Queen. Like everyone else, he couldn't be defined by a
single thought or idea, nor should he be.

Still, there were some things she could ask.

"Why did you decide on all green?" Felicity asked, going on quickly when he tilted his head to the side at her. "I mean, I get why it would've made sense on the island we're not talking about, for camouflage and whatnot. But for that, here, well, wouldn't black be better?" she finished carefully, honestly curious as to how much thought he'd put into his disguise.

Oliver considered her for a moment, and she watched the thought that they were still sort of talking about 'work' pass through his eyes and just as quickly be dismissed. "The," he paused, deliberately gesturing to his head since saying 'the hood' while discussing the color green in public where someone might here and tie the two to Oliver Queen, again, would be bad. "It belonged to a close friend. She died on the island, and... I kept it. To honor her."

Felicity was again relieved; this time by the fact that he wasn't completely oblivious to those concerns. But that realization was, of course, pushed to the back of the mind by the revelation of what he'd decided to reveal despite not wanting to talk about it. What she'd seen of his opinion of his own past, however, did limit what she could ask in response, so she had to think for a moment before she softly asked, "What was her name?"

Oliver took another sip of scotch before he answered her. "Shado."

That was all he said. And there was an old pain there; memories of loss that still lingered, so she knew better than to keep pushing.

"But why the uniformity?" Felicity asked instead. "Combined with the," instead of saying the word she ran a hand through her hair, deliberately pausing for a second with fingertips pointing at that single green arrow in her ear, before letting the curtain of her curls drop again as she gestured at nothing. "You were kind of asking for some of the comparisons that've come up."

Namely referring to his distaste at being compared to the medieval hero of English folklore. His response to the Dodger a few weeks ago, 'I'm not Robin Hood' had amused her in retrospect. At the time she'd been too busy being relieved that the bomb collar was no longer clashing with her dress and threatening to really end her life for good to take notice. But afterwards she'd had to laugh.

"I mean, you were the first one to 'see' him, too." Felicity pointed out, then frowned. "Why did you
bother emphasizing him then?"

Oliver blinked, "What?"

Felicity took a sip of her water before answering, still almost whisper soft. "You could've said that you were just waking up when someone attacked your kidnappers. That he cut you free before running after one of them but, like Tommy, you didn't really see him." She shrugged, intentionally rolling her formerly hurt shoulder yet again. "Yeah, Lance probably would've linked him afterwards anyway, but it would've taken them a long time to be sure if you couldn't give them a description to start with. And if that description of him hadn't come from you, maybe less of Detective Lance's animosity would've tied you so closely to the case a few weeks later."

Oliver visibly thought for a very long moment, but before he could answer their waitress returned.

First to come was the predictable bread. Warm and soft with a crumbly crust, and the choices of either—butter, slightly chilled so as to melt on contact, or two different oils: one with hotter spices, the other mild—made the expected just a touch more extravagant.

Though if the two of them were actually expected to eat the whole half loaf they were served—the equivalent of what once would've been considered an adequate meal even among nobility or royalty, at least while traveling away from the luxury of the kitchens of those times—it either indicated to her that the ludicrous portions provided in many American restaurants might be translated here even into what were supposed to be 'tastes.' Or, possibly with fee the meal required, this club simply didn't mind wasting the food. A cultural common that the Immortal had to make herself ignore, despite all the ages she'd lived through where most people were just trying to get by with the bare minimum to survive, and despite knowing that there were places in the world where that was still the case. Just like there were still times when even getting by wasn't possible, and that even the worldwide news programs generally ignored it unless there were the mass casualties one would associate with wars involved. Or an actual war.

Felicity smiled her thanks as she accepted a piece of bread, spooning the hotter oil onto her bread plate and mixing it with the spicier oil. Not saying anything as Oliver did the same, both of them ignoring the much more basic, but undoubtedly top-of-the-line, butter.

"I wanted to them to make the connection," Oliver admitted quietly, once the servers had all vanished.

Felicity just listened, chewing an entirely satisfying bite of her bread at the same time both because she was hungry and because it'd look better. While there wasn't technically anything wrong with
just sitting there talking, and these days it could even be explained away by something like a no carb diet, it still required more thought occurring behind all the eyes that were weren't watching—weren't constantly glancing their way—and in their case less was certainly more.

"I wanted the image out there," the vigilante finished after he'd swallowed his first bite of bread. "It's better if everyone has the same man in mind. If everyone knows who I am when I show up. Even if they only know I'm him."

"Hmm, maybe it is," Felicity nodded slowly, before taking, chewing and swallowing her next bite. Then she pointed out. "But it drew a direct connection to you from the start. To Tommy, too," she went on as he frowned. "I'm actually surprised the S.C.P.D didn't bother him more, what with the security cameras 'failing.' But maybe the detective just doesn't hate him that much."

Oliver nodded. "That's why I let myself be arrested. To put those thoughts down." He grimaced slightly as he admitted, "Wouldn't have worked out so well if Digg hadn't signed on when he did."

"But you knew he would," Felicity nodded back, rolling her eyes yet again when he frowned at her. "Despite yourself, Oliver, you actually are a good judge of character when you're paying attention."

"When I'm paying attention?" He repeated, looking like he was trying to decide if he should be flattered or offended by the backhanded compliment.

Felicity deliberately shrugged again, wondering as she did so if she'd shrugged enough times yet to make him feel better. Because rolling that one shoulder wasn't actually a motion she particularly wanted to become habit. "Digg doesn't have many nice things to say about your 'psycho ex-girlfriend.' His words, not mine. I've never met the woman," she shrugged again as she finished, just because it fit, and took another sip of the water that was probably from some specific, praised spot in the world.

Oliver also took another sip of his scotch before answering. "Helena's..." He sighed, shaking his head. "She's complicated, Felicity."

The Immortal sipped again to give herself a few seconds longer to think her response through, holding his eyes as she swallowed. "So am I. So are you." She shook her head when he frowned. "Everyone's complicated, Oliver. Figuring those complications out? That's life."
Oliver only nodded slowly, as he just as slowly tore at his piece of bread again. He'd given her a lot more bread than he'd taken himself. While wasting food after going through who knows how many struggles for it on that island was probably somewhat anathema to him, too, it was also likely that his stomach could simply handle a lot less food than it once could. Not that he wasn't more than capable of working off whatever extra calories he did intake. However she focused on the fight he was having with his eyebrows, which were attempting to furrow against his will as he thought.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about her, either," Felicity put out there as she swirled another tear of bready goodness in spicy oil.

"No," Oliver grimaced slightly, shaking his head. "Helena's..." he sighed. "A fair question, I guess." When Felicity only raised an eyebrow at him as she put her bite bread of in her mouth, his mouth twitched like he couldn't decide if he should smile or frown. "What's Digg told you about her?"

"Just a few things," Felicity shrugged, again not letting herself frown at her own annoyance towards the too-off repeated motion as she replied. "I think he was trying to tell me that this," she gestured between the two of them with her hand, before reaching for the water glass again. "Us. Doesn't bother him."

"Helena bothered him," Oliver nodded, and Felicity chuckled.

"To put it mildly."

The vigilante snorted. "He didn't really do that."

"I'm sure." Then she sighed. "You did tell her pretty quickly. About, you know; you."

The vigilante's brow furrowed, "No. I didn't." He shook his head as he went on, almost too quietly for even her to hear. "I didn't just tell her, Felicity. Her father's men would've killed us."

"Would they?" Felicity frowned, not liking playing devil's advocate here, but also knowing it needed to be asked. "Digg didn't seem to think—"

"Digg wasn't there," he cut her off, a little sharply; though still too softly for anyone other than her to hear.
Felicity waited a moment, just to see if he'd go on. But when she saw him visibly pulling himself back and readying an apology, she spoke first. "No, he wasn't. And I wasn't either," she shook her head. "I just don't understand why you'd tell Helena so quickly, when..." she trailed off, biting her lip because that wasn't at all where she'd though she was planning to go when she opened her mouth.

"Hey," Oliver's hand caught hers, unhappy sharpness giving way surprisingly quickly to understanding. "It wasn't about trust, Felicity. It was..." he paused, considering his words carefully, then he winced. "I mean, I *wanted* to trust her. But, really, I think I just wanted someone I could talk to."

"Talking's good," she replied mildly. "And I guess your situations might've felt sort of similar? With her hunting down mobsters."

The vigilante nodded, grimacing slightly. "I knew," he shook his head. "I knew as soon as she told me about her fiancé. About what her father had done. That she wouldn't let it go. But I had to try."

That, the Immortal could understand. It wasn't about wisdom. It was about hope. Hopefully, however, Oliver had learned his lesson. At least enough to realize that redemption couldn't be found in saving someone else from themselves; especially not when the redemption you really needed to find was for yourself. Not because she thought he really needed; but because he thought he did. She remembered, ages ago, the man that'd been called 'Death' telling her she was his redemption, but she also knew that her brother had had to learn to forgive himself before he could hope to move beyond his past. At least as much as he *ever* could. Just like anyone else.

Felicity cocked her head to the side, not letting herself favor the formerly injured shoulder that only bothered her now because she still had to keep pretending that it was hurt but healing. "It was a messy situation to put yourself in." She observed, adding quickly before he could reply, "But, then, you could say the same thing about most of Starling."

Oliver blinked. "What?" he asked, as he had a few times before already tonight.

Instead of answering, Felicity reached for her water again, because the waitress was on her way back with what was likely their next course. Assuming, of course, that the bread was their first. *Was* bread still even considered a course in restaurants these days, or was it just what was on the table with the water before the actual food came out?
The vigilante didn't react to the redhead's return, even though she'd come up from almost directly behind him. (The restaurant must be somewhat circular, architecturally, since the staff didn't seem depart to or approach from any specific direction.)

"And here we have the Cuori di Caesar," the waitress presented their plates. "The chef's reconstruction of Caesar's original salad. Hearts of Romaine serve as vessels for the classic dressing, topped with parmigianno-reggiano and the chef's skillet-toasted miniature croutons. Served with Domaine Carneros Le Rêve, 2005."

Oliver had listened as she introduced the food, but he stopped the sommelier before he could even pour him a taste. "We ordered the red wine," he reminded the waitress, but it was the wine steward who answered.

"Indeed, sir," the tuxedoed man tilted forward in an almost bow. "Your selection would overpower the appetizers. However it will certainly be served with the entrées."

"Unless you'd prefer it sooner?" the waitress hurriedly interjected, not seeming to see the sommelier's frown.

Felicity shook her head ever so slightly when her date glanced at her, not bothering to hid her amusement at the unintended show.

"No, this'll be fine," Oliver allowed, but nodded to her when the wine steward tried to pour the taste again. "It's the lady's choice."

"Of course, sir. Miss?"

Felicity gave a small smile as she nodded her agreement; fully aware that this was stubbornness on his part at being banned from buying her the promised bottle of wine, much more so than the catering of a good host. Once the taste was poured, she picked up the glass with a quiet, "Thank you."

At a quick glance it looked good: the glass was right, as was the temperature, color and consistency from each quick angle. She breathed the flavor in few quick sniffs as she swirled the sample around. Despite being on the latter end of its generally acceptable age, none of the common flaws spoiled the soft but tart tropical notes of fruit. Lastly, a sip confirmed its pleasant complexity. It wasn't sweet: as a brut wine it should be, but there was a slight tang to it. All flavors that
balanced elegantly with the bubbles that danced on her tongue.

Felicity finally nodded confirmation to the serene steward after only a moment. "Superb, thank you."

The man nodded respectfully, filled her glass, followed by Oliver's after he'd gestured for it to just be filled, then departed with a bow for them both, their waitress now trailing behind him.

Oliver finished his scotch as they were leaving, then asked, "So you like white wines, too?"

Felicity made herself shrug her opposite shoulder this time, because it should get the point across without irritating her quite so much. In theory, anyway. "I don't dislike it. And it is a better pairing for Caesar salad," she admitted, while delicately picking up the little lettuce 'boat' and taking a bite.

It was vaguely amusing to her that the man that'd once been hailed as Alexander's great predecessor was better remembered now by his name alone, rather than any of his victories. Not surprising, per say, since his cognomen was swiftly adopted as a title of imperial character that his own predecessors were wise to utilize.

Though the fact that Caesar later became a name like any other again did make her wonder if most modern minds wouldn't consider him as distant a historical figure as any other if not for Shakespeare and other entertainers since the English bard that'd given Methos more than a few scares. Her brother had gone to so much trouble to make sure Immortals remained myths, himself especially—though it'd turned out he'd done a better job for her—that the plays that still enthralled the world today had troubled him until the last one was published without any mention of any orphans born by storms or coming back from all deaths but one.

Never mind that the restaurant seemed to be hiding the salad's non-European origins via an Italian name that it's creator had never claimed, despite having been born in Italy.

Oliver nodded his acceptance of her response, before asking, "You were saying something about Starling earlier?" he asked, adding on: "About it being a 'messy situation'?"

Felicity blinked at him, confused by his questioning the simple observation. "You don't think it is?" she cocked her head to the side, finishing off her first 'boat' as he picked up his own.
The vigilante's brow furrowed slightly, as he chewed and swallowed. "I'm not sure what you mean." He shook his head.

"Hmm," Felicity took a sip of the bubbly before answering. "Then what'd you mean? When you told Digg that people here used to help each other here?"

"They did," he replied, not seeming to get her question, either. "Now they don't. Not really."

"Hmm," the Immortal hummed again, wondering how much of that was the naiveté of holding onto childhood's glowing years, and how much of it was actually a simple truth. She knew it was at least partially true, because Diggle had seemed to somewhat agree with Oliver's assessment of city's decline.

And because she'd seen it in some of her own research, though it hadn't been obvious enough to deter her choosing to move here. Like many Immortals, she'd learned to watch for the signs of too swift a decline; the sort that could erupt into violence and even outright civil war at the drop of a hat. Starling City wasn't there yet. At least it hadn't been when she moved here a few years ago, but she was starting to wonder if it might not be all that far off now. Because the need for action—vigilante or otherwise—had been hinted at by many, but Oliver's own words declared it outright.

Setting her glass down again as she finished that sip, Felicity sighed. "People are complicated," she reiterated, shaking her head as his brows frowned. "And a city's made up of a lot of people, Oliver. 'Saving them' all's impossible. Saving most of them? Well, that's always going to be complicated. And very messy, just going by what we've seen so far? Very messy."

Oliver considered that, finishing off another salad boat. Then he cocked his head to the side. "Are we talking about The List or just the last few weeks?"

The Immortal frowned. "Both, Oliver. And neither," she sighed, shaking her head yet again. She set down the piece of lettuce she'd been about to eat without even really thinking about it, her hands moving of their own volition as she tried to express her words with somewhat constrained gestures, too. "What you're doing? What we're doing? It's not just a list. It's not just one thing at a time. Because... What you've crossed off? Some of them can come up again. And what you haven't gotten to yet? Well, they might come calling before you get to them, too."

Her reaction was probably too animated, she could see that in the extra glances coming their way now and in the fact that Oliver wasn't eating or drinking anything just now because all the attention of those blue eyes were locked on her. But it was a point that had to be made, the sooner the better. And however many more times it took.
After a moment too long, Oliver nodded. "You're right," he answered, then took a sip of his wine.

Felicity did the same, hoping her relief at his agreement wasn't too blatant. "Thank you," she said it almost into her wine as she took the sip.

The vigilante nodded again, picking up his last piece of salad. (What'd happened to the rest of it? She still had half her little plate left!) "Digg thinks I get zeroed in on the problem too much sometimes, too. You're both right," he shook his head. "But sometimes that's the only way I can deal with everything."

Felicity smiled softly, silently nodding to the busboy that appeared to collect the bread basket and Oliver's plate to let him know he could take hers, too. Once they were once more out of earshot she told him, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to—"

"No," Oliver cut her off firmly. "You're right."

"I know," Felicity agreed, shaking her head slowly. "But somehow we started talking about 'work' again. And we're not supposed to be doing that tonight, right?"

The stern resolve melted into a relieved smile, "That's life, too, isn't it?" He went on as she nodded her own relief. "My coffee shop's in that neighborhood, remember?"

Felicity nodded slowly. "So's mine."

Their exchanged smiled were again interrupted by the arrival of another course which seemed to be sushi. That wasn't the artful description Angela gave of it, of course, but that was what it ultimately was.

A medley of other courses followed. All of them examples of fine cuisine from various food capitals around the world. None of them exactly authentic in the sense that anyone who'd actually been to Japan, Paris, Athens, Buenos Aires, or any of the other places represented could say that the dish intended to exemplify some delicacy of the region was quite what they'd actually had there. And Felicity would know, because at this point there were fewer places she hadn't been than vice versa. But beneath the dressings of elaborate plating on fine china, available ingredients and artful alteration, the intent was there. And it held throughout the meal. Excellent tastes from all around the world to delight any palate adventurous enough to try them. Combined with equally
excellent wine—the red was even better than the white—and the company, it was a wonderful meal all around.

So when it was interrupted by the very unwelcome sensation of another Immortal nearby slamming into her—the nearness of another Quickening triggering that buzz between her eyebrows as her own Quickening's adrenaline alarms—it took all the experience of every century she'd lived through not to let it show. It wasn't easy. The way things had been going of late, she was starting to feel like she'd somehow missed the memo about her home becoming one of the stupid Game's gathering places.

"Hey, are you okay?" Oliver's voice brought her back to the present; where his questions and tone told her she hadn't been as successful in concealing her discomfort as she'd hoped. The worried brow, above those all too observant eyes, wasn't a surprise as he asked, "What's wrong?"

Felicity shook her head automatically. "Nothing," she replied, reaching for her wine.

Oliver didn't look like he believed her.

And it wasn't going to get easier with the other Immortal obviously coming closer.

Then Oliver, looking at something, or someone, behind her—back towards the entrance—frowned. "Damn. No, don't look," he stopped her before she could start to turn her head; not that she was going to—given how close the other Quickening was now, it was all too likely that whoever had walked in was the one she was sensing. "The guy from Merlyn Global's here."

That almost made Felicity feel better.

A brief perusal of the Watcher databases had confirmed her initial suspicions that the other Immortal tech expert wasn't a warrior. The Watchers had lost track of Paulius Starek somewhere in Switzerland a few years back, but before that he hadn't even fought in half a dozen duels yet. He was raised among the Polish nobility in the 16th century, and lived a mortal life that favored the arts over everything else. Even after he became Immortal he remained more of a scholar than a fighter; understandably preferring to remain in the privileged circles of his mortal life as long as possible. A few too close calls with witch-hunters led to him traveling to other parts of Europe; once as a diplomat, more often as a wealthy merchant or lifelong scholar. That he'd condescended to master a trade and enter someone's employ at all was actually a distinct sign of personal growth for him, and likely the main reason the Watchers hadn't found him again yet.
Though they would soon enough if he kept going around emulating the Highlanders by not really changing his name. A lot less important for modern-born Immortals, but even their names would eventually start to sound strange. Hence the reason Paulius probably called himself 'Paul' now, but that wouldn't be enough to hide him from the Watchers. Or the League.

Regardless, Starek didn't have nearly enough experience or training for Felicity to consider him a threat in that sense. So the only problem was the possibility of him recognizing her here.

At least there wasn't yet another Immortal invading her home. Yet.

"What guy?" she made herself ask, because she had interacted with the two security guards, too. Though Oliver wasn't as likely to recognize them on sight as he was the man that'd all but chased her out of the building.

"The security tech guy," Oliver answered, grabbing his own wine to hide his frown behind. That, and the way he made himself look at her instead of continuing to glare at the newcomer he wasn't happy to see, was yet another indication that the vigilante had had some experience with espionage prior to his crusade, but that wasn't at all something they could talk about here.

"Hmm," Felicity studied her own wine, which had been freshly refilled a few minutes ago. "Is he here with someone?" she asked, and quickly took a sip to hide her wince as she realized a potential problem.

Paul Starek worked for Malcolm Merlyn. Who was far more likely to have a membership here than any new employee. Who, like other business leaders, likely used that membership to host work functions. And who'd probably come over and say hello if he saw Oliver here, so Starek being with him would be bad.

"I think he's headed towards the bar," Oliver told her, looking away from his plate to glance at her, his eyes looking beyond her for only the quickest second before coming back to hers. "The banquet rooms are back there, too. There's probably a MerlynGlobal function there tonight."

"Probably," Felicity agreed, savoring another sip of wine before adding. "I don't look anything like I did that day, so—"

"So he probably won't recognize you," Oliver interrupted with a nod of agreement even as he added, "Just don't look at him." When she blinked at him, he added. "Your eyes are pretty
distinctive, even with the different make-up."

Felicity smiled slightly, obediently continuing to watch him, like she would've done anyway. She had to focus on something while ignoring the panging pulse behind her eyes that wasn't fond of the Buzz, it might as well be Oliver's handsome face. "Where's he now?"

Oliver risked glanced over her shoulder—the right one this time, not the left—before meeting her gaze again with a frown. "He's stopped. Looks like he's looking for someone."

That's because he was, of course, but the Immortal could hardly say that.

"I could go powder my nose," Felicity offered, though it wasn't something she intended to do, so she quickly added. "But that might just make him notice me."

In fact it'd definitely make Starek notice her, and that couldn't lead to anywhere good. Not when Oliver was bound to notice the other man noticing her, and if Starek followed her, Oliver would follow, too. A less than lovely way to end the evening all around, so once again she had to just keep suffering through just silently telling the warning buzz in her head to shut up rather than taking the easy way to switch it off by making eye-contact.

"No," Oliver said, shaking his head as he caught the hand she wasn't still holding her wineglass in with his own. "Stay put. We can leave once he goes out back."

Felicity frowned, "We haven't had dessert yet," she protested. More because leaving so quickly might be a way for Starek to figure out who she was. Better to wait for the other tables that were just about done to start emptying. Two of the big ones looked like they should be finishing up anytime now. And if they left when both tables emptied she'd be somewhat concealed by numbers; since she highly doubted Starek had any training in reading auras, let alone Quickenings well enough to recognize anyone.

Oliver returned her frown, eyebrows furrowing just a little this time as he clearly wondered if she was serious, but then he spotted their waitress returning again, and rolled his eyes. "Here it comes."

Indeed, Angela was at their table only a few seconds later, a cheerful smile on her face as she waited for them to draw their hands back out of the way before she set a plate between them. "And last but certainly not least we have the house favorite; the Crémeux au Chocolat Noir, for two." She set a spoon in front of each of them. Still smiling, she asked, "Would you like anything else?"
"No, thank you," Oliver answered immediately, and Felicity shook her head in agreement when the waitress looked at her.

"Then enjoy," the redhead indicated the dessert, smile still fixed on her face as she finished her spiel. "And we hope you enjoyed dining with us here at Aesdomus this evening."

"Thank you," Felicity smiled at her again, waiting till the redhead had left before she reached for her spoon, "Is he still there?"

"No," Oliver also grabbed his spoon. "The maître d’ just took him out back. Still looked like he was looking for someone though."

"Maybe he was expecting to see someone here," Felicity offered as she took her first bite of the decadent dessert, moaning as the flavor hit her tongue.

Oliver grinned at her as he took a bite himself.

"Mmm..." Felicity moaned around the second bite of the delicate French custard, too. Focusing perhaps too much on the flavor, now, because it was easier than trying to talk while her head went on buzzing. The warning always faded, a little, from its first initial cocophany, but it wouldn't go completely away until she either made eye-contact with the other Immortal or the potential threat was out of range. Seeing as they were dining in the same restaurant—and Felicity wasn't sure she liked what that said about dining out in Starling City—that wasn't likely to happen soon. So the dessert was a welcome distraction.

The finely prepped, perfectly balanced blend of dark chocolate combined with sea salt, all whipped up in a creamy concoction, was perfect. It made her wonder, not for the first time, how humanity had lived before the invention of chocolate. How exactly the divine creation had taken so long to come into being had never made sense to her. Not since she was there when tasty—not always easily breakable—bricks of the stuff started selling in markets that catered to those who could afford such luxuries. Though it also made her glad that her metabolism was just as supercharged by her Quickening as every other aspect of her immortalized body was. Otherwise she'd undoubtedly have to put far more hours into exercise than she did already.

"What?" she asked, just a little defensively, when she saw Oliver watching her with a smile. "It's good. No, it's amazing. Like a miracle in my mouth."
He chuckled, smiling as he stole another spoonful for himself. "Well, you definitely weren't lying to Tommy and Laurel about being addicted to chocolate."

Felicity wrinkled her nose. "I wouldn't say I'm 'addicted.' Just... I'd rather not do without it. Every now and again." Then she winced as her battered brain caught up with her words. "Though we all have to made do, sometimes."

"Oh?" Oliver raised an eyebrow as he took another bite, curiosity clear. "When were you cut off from chocolate?" he asked, ignoring her referencing his time 'away' again.

"Growing up." Felicity answered as she finished another spoonful herself, almost not even needing to think about it to twist the truth around just so. Except she found herself having to stare at the dessert as she said it. "I didn't have any chocolate as a child."

"My mom never let me have soda when I was a kid." Oliver's small smile was nostalgic as he went on. "I used to love going into Q.C with my dad, 'cause he let me have it there."

Felicity snorted softly. "Some might call that bribery," she waited a moment, then observed. "That didn't really work. You shut down your mom's bids to involve you at Q.C pretty hard a few months back." She let the statement stand as he nodded, then asked, "I'm guessing she didn't take that well?"

Because she couldn't imagine how Moira Queen could ever react well to the very public humiliation her son had resorted to in order to stay out of the family business. And she had to wonder if some residual guilt from that, compounded by his stepfather's kidnapping, might not have more to do with how protective Oliver was of his mother when it came to her potential involvement in whatever was happening in Starling City than just filial loyalty. Which was obviously a factor too.

"No, she didn't," Oliver admitted, setting his spoon down to let her take the last scoop of the dessert. He sighed. "Turns out our situation might be more like Helena's than I'd like."

"Maybe," Felicity said softly. "Maybe not. We don't really know."

Oliver obviously didn't entirely agree even as he nodded. "All set?" he asked, nodding slightly behind her in the direction Starek had gone without seeing her. "We should probably get going
now. If it were a few weeks from now, it might not matter, but almost anyone can recognize someone they just met a few days ago."

Felicity nodded slowly, thankful to see one of the big tables she'd been hoping would leave soon starting to do so. "Yeah, sure. We should go."

"Don't worry about the bill," Oliver told her softly as he stood up, rounding the table to help her out of his seat. Looking like a perfect gentleman, and doing an excellent perfect job of blocking her from that side of the room's direct line of sight as he did so. "They let us in, so it's safe to say my tab's still open."

With a migraine starting to form thanks to the nearness of another Immortal, it hadn't even occurred to Felicity that she should probably ask about their leaving without paying. Whether or not a normal I.T girl who'd never experienced such luxuries would've noticed that none of the people who'd departed since she and Oliver had arrived had received their bill first, or if she would've made the connection to the fact that it was probably tacked onto whatever fees were sent to them or their accountants, after the fact, wasn't the sort of specific even she could think about through the Buzz that triggered all Immortal's fight or flight response.

Obviously Mathis Fournier hadn't been anywhere near as close when he'd sensed her at Tommy's birthday dinner just as his father had crashed it. Which might mean she needed to look into how far out her own Quickening was broadcasting again—it'd probably been too long since she'd meditated. But that was something to think about later, not while she was letting herself be guided outside.

Oliver led her up behind the large party that was leaving, keeping himself between her and the direction of the man that he didn't know could be a literal threat to her every step of the way. When the party reached the reception area the majority of them went out the front doors, and he tugged her around the two couples that seemed to be turning towards the side entrance they were headed out.

It was yet another testament to the influence of Oliver's family in this city that the maître d’ followed them towards the side door instead of the larger party, moving ahead of them with quick but somehow unhurried looking steps to open the door before they got there. Though one of the two men on guard outside quickly grabbed the door while his colleague held open the other as their supervisor bid them good night. "Have an excellent evening, Mister Queen."

Other than a nod to encompass basically all of them—security guards/doormen and master of the restaurant alike—Oliver all but ignored the toady. Their ride pulled up before they were halfway down the short walkway towards the parking lot, with the chauffer that must've been staring at the exit on and off while waiting for them hurrying around to open the nearby door for
"Where to now, Mister Queen?" the man asked once he'd hurried back around to the driver's seat, glancing through the now open window at his employer.

"Back to Miss Smoak's house, Ricky. Thanks," Oliver answered, his arm going around her shoulders again as he hit the button to close the window again for privacy.

Then they were on their way, and Felicity couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as the Buzz finally started to abate in her head. A dull thrum not long after they turned out of the parking lot, quickly fading to just the after-pangs of her head complaining at the prolonged assault from pains that it wouldn't otherwise normally feel.

"You okay?" Oliver asked her.

"What?" Felicity blinked at him.

"You're doing this crinkly thing with your eyebrows," he told her, one hand going to her forehead, concern painted across his own face. "Headache?"

"Yeah," Felicity sighed, not really deciding to lean into his palm, but not wanting to pull back when she noticed his normally very warm hands felt soothing cool. Meaning the Buzz's burning was maybe a bit more literal, physically, than she'd ever realized. And that his hand on her brow made it feel a bit better. But after a moment she pulled back to start rubbing her temples herself. "Guess I should've had more water, less wine."

When she looked at him a moment later, Oliver was studying her again, his amazing eyes undoubtedly seeing more than she should want him to. "Don't worry about... whatever his name was. You showed me the police report about Merlyn Global not handing any security footage over; that they said their system crashed that night and the S.C.P.D's blaming the Triad," he winced, shaking his head. "Mister Merlyn probably made that happen, but if the S.C.P.D's not looking into it, it's unlikely anyone at Merlyn Global will be backtracking that far in the day. And your cover from Q.C was solid, right?"

"Yeah," Felicity replied, forcing herself to stop massaging her temples. "And no one ever said anything about it. Even if Erika noticed she got paid for it, she probably wouldn't say anything 'cause she really doesn't like doing off-site work, so..."
"So there's nothing to worry about," Oliver nodded, giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze that, again, she couldn't help but relax into.

The Immortal watched him for a moment, a little amazed that this man could be both so perceptive and, well, not, under varying circumstances. That he chose to pay so much attention to her was beyond flattering, of course, but it could still be a big problem going forward. Especially since she really wasn't sure how he'd react to her secret.

Sometimes it was easy to tell. For some the magic of it all was outright terrifying, while others merely marveled at it. Some people became uncomfortably curious in the scientific sense, while others didn't want to ask anything about it at all until it occurred to them that she'd actually lived through so much history.

It had been a very long time since she'd told a man she was in love with though. Felicitas didn't tend to fall in love all that easily, finding it hard to truly trust her heart entirely to someone even before the last time. And that the last time she'd tried, she couldn't have been more wrong about him.

Felicity didn't think that was at all the case with Oliver. From what she'd seen of him—from everything about his city-saving crusade to the way he put himself between her and danger without even seeming to think about—he couldn't be less like the Spaniard that'd switched from eagerly anticipating their nuptials to declaring her a witch. In fact, she thought Oliver might not have all that much trouble taking her Immorality in stride. If she was right, it was The Game he'd have trouble with. Which was a dance she'd done before. But it was so hard to be sure...

Felicity barely noticed him shifting, till his hand on the back of her neck startled her. "Wha..." she started to ask, trailing off in a soft moan as he started gently kneaded the tense muscles like had more than a few times now down in his lair.

"Relax," Oliver told her softly, the command as soothing as the gentle strokes of his strong fingers. "Really, Felicity. It's not like he was going to come running out of the restaurant after us even if he recognized you."

"No," she agreed, making herself talk even as she all but folded into his touch. "But he probably would've connected you to the biker that I said was my boyfriend."

"And said what?" the vigilante asked her, sounding amused. "What would he even say if he
reported that to anyone at M.G2? That he let some girl from Q.C play with the mainframe a few hours before the attack, then—after the computer crash that we know Mister Merlyn either made happen himself or ordered—say that he saw the girl again? Only now instead of gothic make-up, black leather and hair, she was a blonde on the arm of Oliver Queen at one of the city's top restaurants?"

"You may have a point," Felicity conceded.

Because he did. If not for their shared Immortality and the Quickenings that recognized each other based upon proximity, she wouldn't have needed to worry all that much about Starek ever recognizing her tonight. Even if she ran into him again later, as long as she wasn't with Oliver or Digg and didn't have a comm in her ear, she'd have no reason to worry about it. Not after looking at his Watcher profile.

Actually, after looking at his records in the database, Felicity was a little surprised he actually actively looked for whoever was triggering the Buzz. Never mind his deciding to actually seek her out when she was at Merlyn Global Group Tower. All she could attribute it to, really, was maybe he'd never met a female Immortal before. Perhaps it was the novelty that gave him the spine to actually talk to her in the first place. Or machismo leading him to the false assumption that even if they fought each other, he'd win. She'd encountered it before, and knew from his history according to Watcher records that without a great deal of luck he wouldn't stand a chance against her. So no, it wasn't fear of Paulius Starek that'd caused the tension Oliver had noted.

It was the continuing need to lie to Oliver. Even only by omission.

"You know, this is a lot easier when you're sitting in your chair," the archer told her with soft chuckle.

"Hmm, is it?" Felicity smiled slightly, looking through her lashes at him. "With all the time you spend on that salmon ladder, I'd think you'd be used to awkward angles."

Oliver snorted, still smiling as he stopped massaging her neck and moved his arm back around her shoulders. "I wouldn't think it'd surprise you to hear that there were actually very few positions I haven't tried."

Felicity blinked, then blushed, but couldn't help but smile at him. "And do you think we're there yet?" she raised an eyebrow at him. "I mean, you're the one that wanted a real date first."
That surprised another laugh out of him that she could feel rumbled pleasantly through his broad chest, tucked comfortably into his side as she was. "Well, thanks for accommodating me, then."

"You are very welcome," Felicity replied, meeting his smile with her own.

And this time it wasn't a surprise when he kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY! The date's done! OK, the last 2 episodes threw me for a bit of a loop, leading to further delays with this chapters, so I'm going to rant a little. SPOILER WARNING FOR MID-SEASON S4!
The break up that wasn't. (YAY!) A little over the top and a little bit OOC for Felicity, not so long after their 1st fight when she was trying to save Ray. But, it didn't happen anymore, so I guess I can put it out of my mind. Mostly.
The secret that didn't need to be (the embodiment of drama for drama's sake.) Not telling Felicity about his son because Samantha doesn't want him to will only allow them to meet if he doesn't tell anyone... Just seems like stupid drama that's counter-productive. Except for this choice Oliver's grown so much as a person and a hero. But here they're reverting him back to who he was before the Gambit sank like nothing's happened to make more mature? He wants to know his son. OK. But Oliver could've told Felicity before Samantha's demand, or specified that she be the exception, etc. Samantha's the one that lied to him. Hid his son. Etc. I can't see why Felicity couldn't know, too. They could've had the exception argument, the reveal to Felicity, her meeting them. That would've made sense. But NO... Besides the Olicity problems, I loved the crossover episodes. Wonderful intros for the Hawks and Savage. And 'good' Malcolm being bad again at the end. Great episodes all around.

And THAT ending that may've completely ruined a good carol for me for life. Still, it was a beautiful scene. Hard to do, following that proposal that could've made the episode the perfect present to all Olicity fans everywhere if the episode had ended then.. but it didn't. Everything in the car: conversation, kiss, realistic reactions, Oliver struggling to get them out of there to sweet singing voices, getting away only to realize Felicity's not OK; all amazingly done. I won't be able to listen to that song without remembering this scene.
Bravo to the cast: Steven & Emily especially.
Except for how they got away, the scene was perfect. Wouldn't the HIVE guys have followed them? Ignoring that; yes, Felicity being shot was bad. But a cliffhanger was expected. It's not yet 6 months from the 1st episode of S4, so I've mostly convinced myself that Oliver and Barry were not, in fact, standing (or going to be standing) at Felicity's grave.
I'm mostly stuck to the idea that she'll be wheelchair bound by this. (Preferably temporarily; it's not like this verse hasn't cured worse). She's already the Arrow
Oracle, so why not?
Oliver feeling guilty for never telling Felicity about his son before she died would just make the stupid-drama more stupid. Whereas his being devastated by her being hurt, ultra protective, and guilty about not telling her but not wanting to upset her while she's healing is potentially plausible. As long as it doesn't spiral back to 'I can't be with you because it's not safe for you,' because that'd be super-stupid. As Team Arrow's current financier via Palmer Tech, Felicity would remain a top target for HIVE. She'd be a target just for funding Oliver's mayoral campaign, too. Darhk already knows she's his weakness. So; no. Though I can't see hurt-but-healing Felicity getting to go anywhere without a bodyguard anymore. Digg or Lyla? Or maybe the poor guy from S1 for a bit? Could be funny.

...And I think I may be done ranting.

But Questions: 1) Does anyone have any idea what the underground cornfield that's worth destroying the city over is? I keep thinking about it and coming up completely blank. Google hasn't helped either.
2) When Oliver pulled Felicity out he held her against his chest for a dramatically desperate ending shot. Coulson reacted the same way when Skye was shot on AOS. Rather than, you know, putting pressure on the wounds? Is that just a dramatic license thing, or does anyone knows actual medical reasons? Just curious.

SPOILER END!
For Felicitas: I hope to have the next update out much sooner, if my muses don't start running away with it all. Again. Thank you to everyone who left the helpful comments. They made me feel even more guilty for not finishing this sooner, but also helped me keep going. Let me know what you think so far!
And no, you're not going to get more of this date night past the kiss. Sorry, that just seemed like a good place to end it, since the last part was mostly in the car and the chapter was long enough as it was. So, yes, it ended in the car with a kiss. But I promise that they're not going to be ambushed or anything crazy like that. And I didn't blow up the restaurant, right?
Just in case: Happy Holidays to all! (I'm not being politically correct. I hope that everyone who celebrates any holidays this time of year enjoys them. If out of some sort of ultra-atheism you don't even celebrate New Year's, I still hope that there are happy days ahead of you.)

~Jess S
Thanks to Roseberrygirl, fallingmeleth, Laienth & AerynSun75 for your kind comments on the last chapter - it was nice to know the date was well received even if it was too long in coming, and it definitely helped me keep my mind on the story between Christmas shopping and all the other madness leading up to the holidays. (I actually went shopping yesterday, the Saturday before Christmas, something I try to never do but late lists sometimes require it. And I was really surprised: other than parking some places it really wasn't that bad. Except for Kohls. I spent at least twice the time waiting in line there that I did looking around. Which wouldn't have bothered me all that much if I hadn't then gotten to the register and spent what seemed like twice the amount of time I'd been in line waiting for the crazy cashier to finish ringing my order. As sympathetic as I try to be to people who have to work these jobs around the holidays, I don't think anything could really justify her taking fifteen minutes to ring five things, not talking to me almost the entire time because she was busy complaining to her coworker about not being able to get Saturday off on short notice. *shakes head* It kind of made me want to write a scene involving shopping, but the holidays are a long way off at this point in the series, so I'll stick to just complaining here.) Anyway, the date's done! Now on with the rest of the story! Enjoy! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Diggle's P.O.V.

John had known this moment was coming. He wouldn't have gone looking, after all, if he hadn't expected to find something. Well, he probably wouldn't have found this so soon, anyway, if not for Felicity's setup here. But when he'd come in this morning and the computers were beeping, checking them had been an auto-response.

But for the part of him that'd been so entirely relieved when Oliver had told him he'd put an arrow through the eye of the assassin that'd killed Andy, it was hard seeing the proof that he wasn't dead spelled out in the *World News* section of the *Starling City Sentinel*'s website.

**BIALYAN PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED!**

*Interpol suspects "Deadshot!"*

Beneath the headlines, of course, was almost entirely conjecture. No Starling City reporter had the resources to research an assassination in the Middle East. Even if they did, Bialya was of much less
relevance to the world than its southern neighbors—too small, not enough oil and, as far as John knew, no terrorists to bring global scrutiny there. An article on the untimely death of their president was all the consideration most of the world would give them.

Not that John was any different in that respect. All he cared about here, after all, was the identity of the suspected assassin. If President Harjavti had been assassinated by a suicide bomber, the ninjas that were whispered about for ghost stories over there, or almost anyone else, John probably wouldn't have read much past the subtitle. He definitely wouldn't have reread the article multiple times or tried to look for more info himself.

He would have changed out of his suit and started working out a while ago. Instead he was still sitting here staring at the summarized story of a professional murder more than halfway around the world.

"Yo," Oliver's voice from behind startled him—though not nearly as much as the time in the corner of the computer screen did.

"Hey," John returned the greeting as he closed the window he'd had up before turning around. "Where you been?"

The billionaire shrugged, "Oh, I thought I'd give myself a rare morning in." He shook his head when his partner raised an eyebrow at that. "Don't look at me like that. The club's opening. Finally. Felicity and I went on our first date last night—"

"First date?" John quoted back at him, bemused by the budding relationship between the two even with the further proof of Lawton's continuing survival fresh on the monitor.

Happy for the distraction. It wasn't like he could do something about Deadshot assassinating anyone in the Middle East last night. Watching his two teammates dance closer and closer together was welcome proof that the world went on.

"You don't count the birthday party then? Or the Dodger disaster? Well, no," he decided with a grimace, "Guess I wouldn't count that one either."

While it was the first time they'd seen their I.T girl decked to the nines; and Oliver's reaction had amused him right up until he'd seen the unwelcome explosive addition to the blonde bombshell's attire a little while later.
"Of course not," Oliver snorted, staying quiet for a moment before explaining. "Yeah, I went to her place after that, just to check on her, and we watched a movie—which sounds very high school, I know, but it... worked. And no," he added quickly. "We just watched a movie. Both times."

"Both times. Well, good to see you're taking it slow." John shook his head, smirking slightly. "Like a glacier, for you."

It made him wonder if the billionaire hadn't skipped over the slower stages of dating in years past. If he'd jumped right into the part of partying playboy even back in high school, and that was why he'd never learned how to take it slow until his not wanting to scare this genius who knew everything about him off had forced him to pause.

"For me before the island, yeah. I never really did the... friends first thing, I guess," the 'playboy' allowed with a frown. "Though my last real girlfriend almost accused me of moving too slow."

"That'd be Laurel, right?" John shrugged, going on without waiting for confirmation. "You were a kid then, Oliver. Yeah, you could vote and buy beer, but you were still a kid."

"I was," Oliver agreed easily, then sighed. "And that kid had to die pretty quick on Lian Yu."

"Uh-huh," John allowed, well able to see how that could've been the case.

The many scars on his employer's body were more than another reason that Oliver Queen was no longer caught partying with his shirt off these days. Each scar told its own tale. More traumatic than any sort of modesty born while in his 'exile.' Not that much modesty at all seemed to pass through Oliver's mind; quite the opposite, since their team grew especially. No, the vigilante had no problem walking around barely dressed in the lair when Felicity was here—and though he was definitely showing off for said blonde, John kind of thought the younger man might also be getting his otherwise repressed extroversion out there at one of the only places he could.

Something their tech girl had adapted to much more quickly than John had expected. Sure, she'd blushed and averted her eyes a few times, stared steadily at her computer screen many more times than that; but Felicity didn't seem shy or anxious around either of them when they were treating the Foundry as their extreme workout zone. A little odd, especially since she and Oliver were dancing around each other a little bit even before she found him bleeding out in her crammed backseat. Obvious to John back then, despite his not previously knowing about their 'movie nights.'
Which brought to mind, again, a question he really should ask since he was starting to feel like a big brother to both of the two people involved here. Though exactly how that'd happened was impossible to put into words...

"You sure about this? Dating Felicity?" John shook his head when the other man frowned at him, clearly remembering they'd kind of already had this talk. Except they hadn't. Not exactly. "Doesn't seem like something you'd normally do. Gotta say; you asking her to tag along to that birthday dinner with Tommy and your infamous ex, little while back? Almost seemed like you were trying to scare her off."

He made sure to keep any judgment out of his voice, not wanting to discourage their budding relationship anymore than he had to. No, if it'd help Oliver Queen realize he really hadn't died on that island, and that having a life of his own didn't mean he couldn't still help Starling City, John was all for it. He'd seen too many good friends go down the darker paths that often involved a lot of alcohol and sometimes too many pills or the barrel of a gun.

The light Felicity brought without even seeming to try could only be a good thing; especially since she seemed to light up even more just being around Oliver. There was some of that lively animation to her all the time anyway, especially when she was in her element, but going by that being with Oliver was even more her element than all her computers, and the way both of them all but preened in response to any attention from the other made it impossible not to root for them.

"I wasn't." Oliver shook his head. "I _was_ asking her as a friend then, Digg. Even if no one else seems to think so." The vigilante sighed, still shaking his head slowly. "No. I'm not sure. I know I shouldn't, but..." He clearly considered his next words. "It feels right."

"Nothing wrong with that," John let his approval color his voice this time, seizing onto the latter because the former was just B.S. "You're both consenting adults, Oliver. You both know what you're getting into."

"I'm not sure she does," Oliver snorted. "But, then again, maybe she knows better than I do." He shook his head again, finally dropping down into a nearby chair rather than standing over his friend. "She always seems to know what to say."

"Long as it's not about defending herself, you mean," John shrugged when the archer frowned. "I know she changed her mind, and if her fencing stuff wasn't a million years ago, maybe she won't have too much trouble with some regular hand-to-hand, but I'll feel better when I actually see it."
"Yeah, me too," Oliver heaved another sigh in agreement. "She said she'll bring her sword in after work today, so I'll see what she's got then."

John watched him for a moment, reassured by how comfortable the younger man was in his own skin this morning. The spring in his step wasn't the same one that the bodyguard had seen after Oliver's night with the psycho mob princess, which was good since he'd much rather his teammates took their time figuring this out. And Oliver seemed to be doing just that. Felicity, too, though that was less surprising. But maybe it shouldn't be. Not with how comfortable the vigilante had been with the I.T girl these last few weeks. That, though, was also a cause for concern here.

"Sure you don't want me to start off with her?"

Oliver frowned again, this time in mild confusion. "You said you don't have any training with swords."

"I don't," John acknowledged. "But basic hand-to-hand I can do. Taught some of it, back in the army. Worked with some women there, too, so I've got some idea of their limitations to start." He shook his head when the archer just kept frowning at him. "That's S.O.P. Don't know much about swords, but soldiers don't just jump straight to knife-fighting. Drills only have a few basic maneuvers to start because it's as much about safety as it is discipline."

"And I'm sure those two thing go hand-in-hand in the army, Digg," Oliver cut in, shaking his head. "But we'll both be focused on just Felicity here. We won't hurt her, or let her hurt herself."

"Playing with sharp weapons is a good way to get hurt even if you don't mean to," John pointed out, nodding towards their closet that served as their make-shift armory. "Don't you have any, I don't know, wooden swords in there? That'd do less damage than a sharp blade."

"I'd have bought those today, but she wants to work with what she has," the billionaire admitted with a grimace. "She was pretty adamant about it. Didn't even want me to get a sword for myself," he shook his head. "Apparently she has some sort of collection of them and wants to give me one."

"That's...an interesting gift after a first date," John said slowly, not sure if he should smirk or be at least a little worried.

"Had nothing to do with the date," Oliver told him. "I think it only came up because I told her we should get started today." He shook his head. "I'd noticed she has a bunch of different swords on
"Not talking about swordplay on your first date's probably a good rule to follow," John said, smirking at the look the younger man gave him. "Surprised _that_ didn't come up if you were talking about swords."

Oliver rolled his eyes. "Felicity might've said something," he admitted, that blend between a smirk and a smile that only seemed to occur in response to the girl they were talking about making an appearance. "Sometimes I wonder if she says stuff like that on purpose, but I'm not sure she could look so shocked at herself if she wanted to."

"And it's adorable," John shook his head, smirk falling as he pressed, "But that doesn't mean it's a good idea to stick to starting with swords in here, Oliver."

"Maybe not," the vigilante allowed, getting up from where he'd been more leaning against the workstation rather than sitting on it to head towards the sparring area. "But it's not like I want to talk her out of any kind of self-defense training, Digg."

That was fair, the soldier had to admit. Though watching his employer walk towards the mat led to his eyes looking at the gear there again.

"You know, we could start off with how exactly she put her phone on top of one of the sparring dummies," John suggested, even though he wasn't sure he could imagine that happening since he hadn't been able to figure out how she did it in the first place. And he wasn't entirely sure it was a great idea to ask her to do it again, but how she'd done it at all continued to bother him...

Oliver stopped after he'd draped his coat over the empty med-station, frowning over at the wooden man. "Maybe she used a step ladder? We've borrowed 'em from upstairs before. Can't remember if we had one down here then."

"We didn't," John told him flatly. "I checked when I first got the phone that morning," he shook his head. "Only thing down there that she could've used easily was her chair. These wheels don't lock, so you'd think just climbing that thing would be safer, but that thing threw me a good few feet when I tried."

That made the vigilante blink at him. "You _tried_ to climb it? You're tall enough to reach the top on your own."
"Which is how I rescued her phone," John nodded. "But I can't figure out how she got it up there, so..." he shrugged.

Oliver looked between him and the dummy again, that thoughtful frown on his face. "We both outweigh Felicity by, I don't know, at least sixty pounds? There's bound to be more of a reaction when you climb that thing compared to her."

The ex-soldier crossed his arms. "Oliver, I didn't just jump on the thing."

Well, that wasn't exactly true. He sort of had, that first time, and the results hadn't been pretty. But he didn't need to tell the much more acrobatic archer that.

"That's one of the ones with the suped-up reactions," John reminded him, more to get on with it so the younger man might stop smirking at him than anything else. "That's why it was out."

Sometimes it being more of a work-out to put the equipment away was an exercise all its own, but most times it was just more than you wanted to deal with. Especially if you'd already been pounding and blocking the thing for longer than you cared to think about. Letting it beat you up while you tried to put it away just wasn't worth it most of the time. Something both men had agreed on without no discussion, but going by a few comments their I.T girl had made about boys not being able to put away their toys, she didn't agree. So why she would've wanted to put her phone on top of the dummy in the first place made even less sense to John Diggle than the question of how she'd ever managed to do it did.

"Could mean she's more agile than we're expecting," Oliver pointed out half-handedly, tugging off his shirt and tossing it aside as he moved towards the salmon ladder. "She's shown she's pretty good at dodging a few times before." He leapt up to grab the bar as finished, starting his repetitions there without bothering to change, and so not needing to head to their 'wash/changing room' as Felicity had dubbed it.

Swing... THUD!

As the pair was now dating, officially boyfriend and girlfriend or not, John had to wonder how long it'd be before Felicity's comments about boys and their toys became more weighted. He couldn't quite see her ever caring about the workout area enough to argue, or even be sharp about it, but it could all too easily be one of those things that built up into a big blow up if Oliver wasn't mindful of such factors.
With how much she liked to watch Oliver workout, it'd probably be a longer time before Felicity complained about him tossing his clothing aside while he half stripped in front of her, but that was still something that could come up, too. And John couldn't decide if he should warn the other man or not.

After all, all of the Queen family had always had servants waiting on them hand and foot at home. That was Oliver's privileged childhood and his present, even if it was interrupted by being a tortured castaway half way around the world for five years and having any kind of cleaners come down here at all would just be asking for trouble.

And John knew the inside of Queen Mansion. Had learned the floor plan and the grounds his first week in the Queens' employ. It wasn't like the family was ever tripping over each other there.

So Oliver had never actually had to share his space with anyone. The exception, maybe, being the half decade away from all of that. More than merely camping out on an island, obviously: because John couldn't imagine either the Russian or Chinese mobs spending all that much time in a place like that, but Oliver had learned Chinese and Russian, and joined the Bratva, somehow.

Still, some of that essential minimalism had leaked into the billionaire's room at home; according to Raisa, the longtime family housekeeper, he hadn't changed a thing when he returned, but he'd purportedly become a lot neater. Even if he'd fallen back into someone doing his laundry and every other chore of the house very easily.

Then again most people probably would. John certainly didn't mind eating Raisa's cooking when he happened to be there for any meal.
Swing... THUD!

Oliver had never really settled down at any of the four colleges he'd flunked out of—where he'd undoubtedly had either their best accommodations or rented far better ones nearby—so the fact that he'd run away from his girlfriend when she wanted to move in together shouldn't have come as a huge shock. Probably wouldn't have, either, if he hadn't taken said girlfriend's little sister along for the ride, leading to her death, and then come back from the dead himself five years later.

Swing... THUD!

All the same, Felicity had handled the tortured man fairly well so far, so John was pretty sure she didn't need to be protected from helping Oliver grow up in the few ways he hadn't had to on that island.

Swing... THUD!

"What are you, working on?" Oliver asked between swings.

Swing... THUD!

John startled, then shook his head as he realized he'd basically been watching the other man workout while he thought, Felicity's norm, not his, so the younger man had realized something was wrong. He hesitated a moment, then admitted, "Just going through some of the stuff Felicity's search programs found since yesterday."

Swing... THUD!

"Deadshot?" the archer didn't mince words.

John shook his head. "There's nothing solid. Just a dead politician and a lot of suspicion."

Swing... THUD!
"Yeah," Oliver acknowledged. "That's what Felicity said."

John blinked at him. "When?"

Swing... THUD!

"Last night," he answered like it was obvious. "She has the alerts—"

Swing... THUD!

"—sent to her phone."

Swing... THUD!

"And her tablet."

Swing... THUD!

"And her T.V—"

Swing... THUD!

"—apparently," Oliver finished, swinging in place for a longer moment at the top this time, posed over the bars with all of his weight balanced on his steady arms. While he'd never been entirely out of shape, the partying billionaire he was before couldn't have managed that feet without effort (or even thought like he could now). While Felicity appreciated the show just for the privilege of watching it, it was yet another thing that kept John wondering what'd happened in those five lost years of the younger man's life.

"Our girl's thorough," John acknowledged, a bit surprised by just how thorough she was. Sure, he'd seen her at work here, and a few times at Queen Consolidated, but the fact that she wanted to take this work home with her—that she realized something important could happen at any moment and that she was their first line of defense on that front—was impressive. Especially since she didn't
have any kind of military or security background to explain how she came to that conclusion on her own.

...Except for her own hacking abilities, and whatever they'd led her into. Another conversation the vigilante and ex-soldier had chosen to not have without talking about it. Because while Felicity had asked astute questions of them before the vigilante had had to reveal the truth to her, she'd still kept helping them without demanding the answers they couldn't give. That, just as much as necessity and the vibrancy that drew the archer to her and made John smile, had had as much to do with Oliver finding her car in the Q.C parking lot as the necessity of that G.S.W had.

"She didn't want to bother you with the article, 'cause it's a dead-end." Oliver said before starting back down.

Swing... THUD!

"Yeah, figured that out myself, thanks," John sighed, turning the computer chair he didn't dare adjust back towards the trio of computer monitors. "Hoped she might have an easier time finding whoever gets his jobs for him with this."

Swing... THUD!

"She might."

Swing... THUD!

"She's been looking—"

Swing... THUD!

"—into the money, mostly."

Which meant bank accounts. And hacking banks. Not exactly a 'standard' skill level for hackers, but then their I.T girl couldn't really be called standard in any way.
Swing... THUD!

Oliver stopped, swinging longer on the bottom bar now as he said, "But I didn't want her to start working on it in the middle of the night." Then he started back up once more.

Swing... THUD!

"No, good call," John agreed. "She can't pull all-nighters for stuff like this. She does have a day job."

Swing... THUD!

The louder landing of a more aggressive jump made the soldier look up at the acrobat, and studying his unhappy face between the next repetition.

Swing... THUD!

After another loud landing, which he'd actually watched come about, John asked, "Something wrong at Q.C?"

"Not sure," Oliver's admission was almost a growl.

Swing... THUD!

"But I think—"

Swing... THUD!

"—her supervisor might—"
"—be giving her trouble," he finished frowningly.

And John frowned, too. "What? 'Cause she's fallen behind at work?"

That didn't sound like what he'd seen of Felicity Smoak at all, so he wasn't surprised to see the vigilante shaking his head as he swung in place to answer.

"Not according to her Q.C file," Oliver replied. "I mean, she's still completing more work than anyone else in her department." He pulled himself through another kip up.

"But if she was doing even more before, makes sense her supervisor would want to know why she's slowed down," John observed. "Could be a problem."

Not the sort of thing he'd think Felicity would let be a problem, but nobody was perfect.

"That she wants me to stay away from." Oliver said, sounding like she'd asked him for the moon and the sun.

"And he's not on the List."

"Uh-huh."

"I checked."
"Uh-huh," John nodded, letting himself smirk again now as he shook his head. "She's got a point, Oliver. It's a bit early for you to be swooping in to save her at work, isn't it?"

Oliver just leapt again.

Swing... THUD!

"And I'm not sure she'll ever be ready for that, anyway," John told him.

"What'd you mean?" Oliver stopped on the bars again to scowl at him.

"Being the damsel in distress at Q.C, with you playing her hero." John shook his head, remembering all too well the few times he'd made that mistake (or come too closer to it) with his wife. Now ex-wife. "Tread carefully, man."

Swing... THUD!

Swing... THUD!

Swing... THUD!

Seeing this wasn't something the other man really wanted to admit here and now, the former soldier switched back to the earlier subject. "What about the background check you did on her?"

Swing... THUD!

"Did it say she studied fencing or something in school?"

"No," the vigilante snorted between reps. "Not that it would."

Swing... THUD!
"If she didn't want anything to come up in her background check..."

"It wouldn't come up," John finished for him as he swung down again.

_Swing... THUD!_

"Did you find anything on her?" the former soldier pressed, knowing that with Oliver's money and many varied connections there had to be something on her.

_Swing... THUD!_

After one last hard landing as low as he typical went on that ladder, Oliver let go of the bar and dropped down to the ground. Then he sighed as he stood. "Not much that wasn't in her Q.C profile. Some stuff from M.I.T." He shook his head as he headed for his water bottle. "She didn't take fencing there. Maybe in high school, but she skipped a bunch of grades there by tests. Took some A.P classes and college courses at the same time."

"That was in Vegas, right? Where her mom lives?" John asked, continuing when Oliver nodded. "How old was she when she moved to Mass?"

"Fifteen," Oliver replied, his smile proud for her. "Had two Masters by the time she turned 20. Got a doctorate, too, while she was working at Q.C."

"Our tech-girl's got some pretty impressive credentials," John nodded, also smiling proudly. But it quickly dropped into a frown. "So why was she working in I.T support?"

Oliver blinked, "What?"

"One Masters in Computer Science I could buy, but two _and_ a doctorate?" John shook his head. "She should at least be the head of the department."

Sure, seniority and connections always had their part in places like _Queen Consolidated_, but so did your credentials. And from the sound of it, Felicity's had to be two to three times what most of her co-workers could claim. Never mind her I.Q probably being way outside of their realm of
Oliver considered that for a moment, then he nodded. "There was a note in her file about doing some impressive work in Q.C's computer security a few years ago. Still in her first year there. I think Walter recommended her for the promotion himself." He shook his head. "And she was the one that Walter contacted about the List, so he trusted her."

And he was the C.E.O. Still was, technically, since his wife refused to take the 'acting' off her job title.

"So why isn't she the head of I.T?" John wondered.

"I don't know." Oliver shook his head again, frowning as he made his way over to the computers and quickly opened a file there.

John pulled the chair back and just watched. When it opened, he wasn't shocked to see what was obviously Oliver's background check on Felicity Smoak, everything from Q.C included. What he was stunned by was where the rest of the information had apparently come from. But Oliver spoke again before he could do anything more than blink at the name of the government agency that Lyla now worked for being used as a source for background checks by Starling City's vigilante.

"Yeah, looks like Walter was considering her for a bigger promotion, before he was abducted, doesn't say anything specific here," Oliver's frown deepened. "There's nothing about why she wasn't promoted sooner." He shook his head as he scrolled back into her pre-Q.C days. "And yeah, there's no fencing on her M.I.T application. Looks like she was homeschooled. The A.P and early college stuff was all online, except for a few tests."

"Thought her mom was a cocktail waitress," John said, surprised. "Don't they work real long hours? And make most of their money at night? Pretty hard to home school her kid during the day."

Oliver nodded his agreement, going back further. "Oh... Looks like her aunt homeschooled her. Maria Smoak. Died just before Felicity went off to M.I.T in oh-four."

Worked mostly as a travel journalist, occasionally a travel agent, traveling all around the world. And probably taking her niece along with her on at least some of the trips if she was responsible
for Felicity's schooling, though the file didn't actually say that.

Digg went through the basics of the Smoak family background aloud, since Oliver was obviously seeing it for the first time now, too. Apparently, in Felicity's case having a background check done on her didn't necessarily mean reading it all. "Her aunt was named for Felicity's grandmother, a Mary Smoak. She died from cancer back in '74. Raised her sister after that, so guess she just took over with Felicity too. What about granddad? Or Felicity's dad?"

"Donna was a single mom, Felicity said," Oliver replied, clicking through the ARGUS informational screens with clear familiarity. "Not sure her dad was mentioned; yeah no name on the birth certificate. She was a preemie."

"Small, too," John commented, smirking slightly as he added. "Least she grew a little bit."

Oliver snorted, "Don't let her hear you say that. She might start wearing heels all the time."

Something the vigilante would probably only mind because their girl had already run into trouble not far from their door, and high heels could've made that night much worse. Not that they'd ever let her walk to her car alone since then, which Felicity hadn't said anything about, but John couldn't shake the feeling that she knew they were following her out even when they were being sneaky about it...

"Pretty sure she's more practical than that," the former soldier shrugged, then winced when he saw what Oliver had found on their friend's grandfather. "Damn."


They both read quickly through it, neither one able to not frown as they read about the fate that'd befallen Donald Smoak some forty years ago.

"Damn," John swore, shaking his head. "I thought shit like that just happened in the Middle East if you were caught without your gun and backup."

Oliver cocked his head to the side. "Do they burn the body too?"
"No, I don't think so," John grimaced. "And I thought your ex-girlfriend was a psycho."

"And they never caught the guy." The vigilante ignored the comment, his scowl more directed at the screen, which only deepened as he hit another ARGUS link.

Then they both swore.

"How the Hell was that never in the news?" John wondered, honestly shocked. "I mean, if ARGUS is right...."

"Then there's still someone going around cutting off people's heads and burning their bodies," Oliver finished for him, eyes narrowed on the brief info, clearly wondering why there wasn't more there than even that.

Even the suspicion wasn't spelled out: it was just there for anyone with access to see themselves in hundreds of unsolved homicides in every major city on the planet, plus more than a handful of less densely populated places, too. Yet it wasn't noted an ARGUS priority, or a priority for anyone, anywhere at all.

"This can't be one serial killer," Oliver shot that thought down after studying the screen for a moment more. "Too many places. Too much time."

"A cult, maybe?" John wondered aloud. "Some of those things are generational."

And wasn't that a scary thought? A cult of murderous madmen like this...

"Maybe," Oliver agreed, standing back up all the way and crossing his arms as he considered something.

"What?" John asked after a second's silence. "You meet any crazy swordsman on that island of yours?"

The vigilante stiffened, but then shook his head, visibly forcing himself to relax. "Nothing like this, no." He was frowning, though, as he met his bodyguard's gaze again. "You think this might be why
she learned fencing in the first place?"

John blinked at him, "Oliver, that was almost twenty years before she was born."

"Sixteen years," Oliver corrected, nodding. "But if there's a computer file on this, do you think she never found it? Her mom and aunt must've talked about their parents."

"Talked about them, yeah," the ex-soldier allowed. "Can't see them maybe indoctrinating their little girl into the same cult that got their dad killed, though."

The vigilante blinked, then shook his head. "No, I don't think Felicity's... or her family..." he shook his head again. "No, but it might be why she wanted to learn in the first place."

After a moment, John agreed uncertainly, "Yeah. Might explain how our computer girl ever got interested in fencing. Don't think they decapitate, though, just stabbing."

"She didn't say fencing," Oliver replied undecidedly. "And she said she was bringing swords. Aren't they called something else in fencing?"

"No idea," he replied dryly.

Oliver kept going anyway. "If she didn't study fencing, she must've studied some sort of martial art, right? I don't think they teach sword-fighting any other way. Except as a specialty."

John didn't really see what the difference was there, or where the archer wanted to go with this line of thought, but he nodded anyway. "Uh-huh."

That didn't fool Oliver, who snorted again. "Digg, I know nothing would make her background check if she didn't want it to." He admitted, thinking about it a moment, then added, "But why she learned isn't really important. If she can defend herself, even a little, that's good."

John nodded slowly, "Could be how she got away from whoever cut her," he ignored the scowl that immediately overtook the vigilante's face again at the reminder, not liking that it'd happened himself, but it had. "Knowing how an attacker moves and how to react is more than half of a
fight," he pointed out, then glanced at the computer screens again as an alert sounded.


Nothing opened over the background check with the ARGUS logo in it, and the computer stopped sounding after that. Not an alarm, then, just an alert about something they should look at happening. Yes, it could be something more about Deadshot, but considering he was on the other side of the world less than a day ago waiting a few minutes before checking the notification wouldn't hurt.

John ignored it in favor of finishing this conversation. "We all have some secrets," he pointed out, forcing a shrug as he indicated the computers. "Still, swordsmanship's not something you really expect from an I.T expert."

"No, it's not," Oliver sighed, shaking his head. "And I'm gonna have to ask her about her grandfather—"

"Gonna talk about Las Vegas, too?" John cut in. "M.I.T? Why she picked Q.C? What she was doing in Starling before you walked into her office?"

The vigilante had rolled his eyes as he waited for him to finish, clearly getting the point. "She knows I did background checks on both of you. Just like you did."

John nodded, then finally tried, "Didn't know you had a federal agency do the checking for you."

Oliver sighed, "My affiliation with ARGUS is complicated."

"Uh-huh," John raised an eyebrow. "Like how you're a Captain in the Russian mob?"

The vigilante locked gazed with him for a few stubborn seconds, but then nodded. "Yeah, sort of," he shook his head. "Not the same thing, but similar."

"And this somehow came about because of that island, too?" John prodded a little more, wanting the confirmation there because the idea that the man he worked with might've been some sort of
spy even before that boat went down, back when everyone knew him as one of the tabloids bad boys wasn't something he was sure he could dismiss out of hand. Because ARGUS recruiting a castaway off an island south of China made even less sense than the Russian mob dropping in to give him the tattoo and rank of a Captain did. Though it was yet another step towards making how easy Oliver had shaken him, back before he found out he was the vigilante, much easier to explain. And, just going by some of the places he knew Lyla had been since leaving the army, ARGUS was definitely an international operation.

The former playboy laughed shortly, "Yeah, Digg. Don't worry. I was everything the tabloids said I was back then. Mostly," he shrugged. "Like I said, I had to grow up pretty fast after *The Gambit* went down."

John nodded slowly.

The younger man went on before he'd thought of a response. "I get what you're saying, about rushing Felicity. I know I shouldn't hold secrets against anyone, and we just started dating." He shook his head slowly, looking thoughtful as he finished, "But last night went really well. Just talking... till I brought up her jogging," he grimaced, shaking his head. "Maybe she'll feel like opening up a little more."

"Shyness isn't something I'd accuse Felicity Smoak of, Oliver," John scoffed slightly, just to see how the other man would react.

His headshake was still thoughtful, maybe even hopeful. "Not shy," he agreed. "Just reserved."

John couldn't deny that description fit their blonde friend fairly well, that she held back a lot despite her tongue sometimes getting away with itself, so he nodded agreement at that. "Works better if it goes both way," he advised the younger man, before finally turning his attention to see what the problem on the computers was.

Oliver didn't say anything as he stepped closer to watch what the programs had found himself.

John saw him stiffen out of the corner of his eyes, even as he clenched his own jaw when he immediately recognized that this alert really should've been an alarm.

"Helena," the vigilante said softly, standing stiffly as they watched the windows open.
On one monitor was the initial police report that'd triggered the initial alarm, but while they were ignoring it Felicity's fairly incredible specialty search program—or maybe programs?—had filled several more screens.

It was the security feed (also stolen from the S.C.P.D evidence) that they'd reacted to first. Because a picture really was worth at least a thousand words, and even a short video was made up of a bunch of 'em. Helena Bertintelli dolled up like a stripper and shooting two crossbow bolts into a terrified man—obviously the recording of a murder in the S.C.P.D's jurisdiction—could really only mean one thing.

"Looks like your psycho ex-girlfriend's back," John observed unnecessarily, unable to resist the dig. Letting every ounce of disapproval he'd felt towards that relationship show. He hadn't hidden it at the time, and he'd been proven right, so he sure as hell wasn't going to hide it now.

Oliver grimaced again, the sight of the admittedly beautiful but ruthlessly vengeful brunette spoiling whatever was left of his good mood this morning. "This was last night?"

"Yeah," John confirmed, nodded to the information that was somehow stolen straight from the S.C.P.D. "At Alley Cats, the strip joint." He read a little further. "Police report lists the stiff's name as Gus Sabatoni."

"That's Bertinelli's lawyer," Oliver shook his head, some confusion showing through the gruffer mask that'd already started to descend as they started talking 'business.' "Why would she come back to Starling City for him? It's not like he did a good job. Her father's serving consecutive life sentences without parole."

John was busy reading the next window to pop up, which was kind of making him wonder if their I.T girl had created artificial intelligence without telling anyone, because her computers really seemed to be thinking and reacting just like the two men were. "Looks like he's cutting a deal with the F.B.I."

"What?"

"He's agreed to testify against the mob, for immunity and a new life." John read quickly. "He was moved out of Iron Heights 'bout two weeks ago."

After they get his testimony he goes into WITSEC."
"Dammit!" Oliver slammed his fist down onto one of the workstations, hard, before spinning towards the training mats to storm towards the dummy that he'd been beating on almost as much as John did ever since Felicity had somehow gotten her phone on its head and probably hurt herself in the process.

John spoke up before he could start there. "Further in the report it says that's why the Sabatoni homicide's being handed over Lance."

The vigilante visibly forced himself to stop, his scowl just a bit deeper than any of the earlier ones as he was forced to contemplate too many likely, unhappy futures.

Because, yes, Lance's team was Starling City's Major Case Squad. But they were also the Vigilante Taskforce. Who had to suspect that the Hood had made the mistake of revealing his real identity to the Huntress, and would want to catch her just for that. The police, for the most part, might not really care if she was still running around murdering mobsters, now or a few months ago, if she was more careful about it. And if she wasn't trying to start a mob war back then. That she might be their best shot at tracking down the vigilante, however, was an opportunity that the S.C.P.D wouldn't pass up.

"Come on, Oliver," John crossed his arms as he stood from the computer chair he didn't dare adjust.

Because the only time he did that it'd taken him three whole days of apologies and coffee bribes to convince Felicity to let him off the hook and make his phone stop annoying him whenever they weren't talking Hood business. And he still hadn't managed to change his ringtone back to anything reasonable, rather than songs little girls probably liked to dance to: that was why he had it on vibrate all the time.

But that wasn't why he was walking closer to his employer and friend, their expressions matching seriousness. "We both knew this was just a matter of time. You tried to help her; you couldn't. Now the question is, how long before she drops the dime on you, me, this whole operation?"

The vigilante scowled at the thought, unable to deny it anymore than he could deny that if they went down there was a real risk they'd take their tech girl, his girlfriend, with them. "Okay. I want you to get in touch with our contacts in the Bratva. Talk to anyone on the street. Figure out where Helena is. If her dad's why she's back."

"Okay. But Oliver—"
"Digg, if she's here, she's here for a reason." Oliver shook his head as he got up and headed for the locker room to change—likely planning on at least a dozen times up his crazy salmon-ladder as punishment for getting them into this position in the first place. "If that's not Frank Bertinelli, we need to know what she has planned."

"Okay," John nodded his understanding, but didn't get up yet. "What about Felicity?"

That, predictably, gave the self-hating man pause. "What about her?"

Like he couldn't remotely see any problem between his crazy ex and his new girlfriend so long as Helena didn't turn him into the cops. Then again, maybe he couldn't.

The bodyguard raised an eyebrow. "Oliver, you took her to the most exclusive restaurant in the city last night."

"Helena wasn't there," he pointed out stubbornly.

"No, but she might read the local gossip rags," John persevered.

"That was one date," Oliver shook his head, wincing even while he said it. "Helena won't think anything of it. She thought I was 'the rich man's Lindsay Lohan' before she found out about all of this."

"'Before,' being the key word." John pressed dryly, refusing to be amused by anything the crazy Huntress had ever said. "And the club opens tomorrow. Even if Helena doesn't show up, plenty of photographers will, and they'll get pictures." He locked gazes again as he finished with, "Either way, your psycho ex will probably hear about her."

"Helena won't do anything to Felicity," Oliver shook his head. "As long as she thinks she's just some girl I just started dating, she has no reason to go anywhere near her."

"Since when is that woman 'reasonable?'" John had to snort at that, "Last I checked she was all about vengeance; to hell with whoever gets hurt in the process."
And really that was what'd bothered him so much about Helena Bertinelli from the start. Even before she went from shooting bullets at crowds to hit one mobster among them to trying to start an all-out mob war in Starling's streets.

Wanting to avenge a loved one was something John could understand, especially now. With the same beast snarling in his chest, curling his fists and making him want to shout at the world for the fact that his brother's murderer still drew breath. If it'd been Lyla that a sniper's bullet had taken from him, whether she was the target or not, John could imagine that the pain might be even worse. But he still couldn't stomach the madwoman's complete disregard for all the other lives she destroyed in the process. That wasn't something Lyla would want. Wasn't something Andy would want either. And John Diggle couldn't want it.

The vigilante glared at him for several long seconds, then shook his head. "First you think my dating Felicity's a good idea," he raised an eyebrow at him. "Now you think I should keep my distance while Helena's around?"

"Nope," John shook his head. "But your new girlfriend might appreciate a head's up sooner than later."

Oliver blinked, then agreed. "Fair enough."

"Not like it's worth trying to hide it," John added before the younger man could turn all the way. "If she gets these alerts at home, she probably gets 'em at work, too."

That made the younger man grimace, before looking at the clock near the stairs. "I'll head home to change now, then see if I can catch her on her lunch break in a couple hours. She usually goes around 12:30."

Made sense: if Felicity's supervisor was already giving her trouble despite (or maybe because of) Oliver's occasional visits in the past, popping in more might not help. Not that John could see the billionaire restraining his protectiveness for very long, but it was the sort of thing an arrow was less than likely to help solve.

"I'm gonna up the security for tomorrow, just in case she does show," John called after him. "You might get a complaint from Tommy."
"He'd have to talk to me for that," Oliver replied, some of the sadness at the seeming loss of his best friend obviously still an issue. But he was already headed out to where he needed to be.

And John had plenty to think about all on his own. Though at least with security plans to work on he could keep his mind busy with thoughts other than the fact that Floyd Lawton, A.K.A Deadshot, was still shooting people dead around the world.

One psychopath at a time was a good rule of thumb, right?

Chapter End Notes

So there's another Oliver & Digg scene, with some of Digg's current mindset because I find it very interesting at this point in the show. I mean, it was even before we got into any of the Deadshot stuff and now, seasons later, into HIVE, but when you throw all that together and watch this episode again (many, many times), it's hard not to think about.
I'm feeling pretty comfortable about where the stories going now; my muses don't seem too likely to kidnap me away from most of my prewritten scenes again, so hopefully the next few updates will keep following on a semi-regular timetable. At least until after New Years, I start at one of my seasonal jobs again in January, so I'll have less free time than I do already, but I will keep trying then, too.
It helps knowing that Arrow will be coming back in January, for sure. Maybe those episodes won't be chalked full of too many things that are relevant to my currently-Season-1 series, but it'll mean I need to spend a little less time wondering then... I still haven't got a clue what the underground cornfield could possibly be for; that actually bothers me more than Felicity being shot, because with her father due to arrive in that first episode of the year it seems very unlikely that the writers will avoid all the drama in that by making him arrive at her funeral. And, you know, I still can't see any plausible way they could really kill her off without significantly damaging the show. Damaging all the character development Oliver's made so far especially... maybe I'm just optimistic, but hopefully I'm right.
Either way, more to come soon!
Comments are always immensely appreciated & sometimes very helpful!
Happy Holidays!
~ Jess S
The Scary Old Flame

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who's commented/kudos'd so far: you guys are great! :-D
And here we have another scene! As you can see, this is another different P.O.V, but it seemed to work well for this scene. Enjoy, and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thea Queen's P.O.V.

Thea had to admit when the sitting room was empty, too.

It'd been a last, somewhat desperate hope that he might be watching T.V or waiting for someone here. The overly formal room was where their mother liked to watch the morning news in, but neither of her children had ever really liked it. She'd searched every other room in the mansion already though, despite knowing he probably wasn't home because Raisa thought he'd been headed out a little while before his sister had started looking for him.

Thea dropped onto the not really comfortable sofa with a groan, reaching for the remote to turn the T.V on. Much as she didn't like this room, it was better than sitting on the stairs waiting to catching him coming in (hopefully sometime soon).

Figures that when she really needed to ask him for a favor, Ollie wouldn't be around at all.

It'd seemed like such a perfect solution, getting her big brother to give the cute guy from the Glades an honest job. She'd both be able to see Roy Harper occasionally, and stop worrying that there was more truth to his 'lies' about having to steal to survive than he'd indicated that night after she'd told Laurel to have her dad drop the charges for stealing a stupid purse.

Sounds good. Know anyone who's hiring high school dropouts with a couple of priors, no references and a history of violence?

When he said stuff like that, so matter-of-factly, it was a lot harder to make herself believe that everything he'd said in that interrogation room wasn't true. Even if she'd never seen his mom.
And yeah, asking Ollie and Tommy to trust a guy who'd been arrested for grand theft auto with parking cars at their new club might be more than she should do to sooth her guilty conscious. But his situation just didn't seem fair, and it seemed only right to give him at least that chance. Plus, they'd do it, for her.

Assuming she ever got the chance to ask them.

Thea sighed.

She supposed it didn't have to be before the club opened tomorrow night. It wasn't like they couldn't add a few more employees later...

A nightclub opened by Oliver Queen and Tommy Merlyn would be a hit in Starling City no matter what it's theme was. The media had lavished praise on it for months, even more so after that crazy pyromaniac had burnt it down during a fundraiser for firefighters. And it wasn't just because the Hood-guy had stopped him: showing up to play the hero again for the first time since the Christmas hostage thing. That was probably part of it; but so was the media wanting legitimate access to Ollie again. He just didn't party like he used to; no one really knew what he did most of the time. So everyone was still curious and the paparazzi wanted pictures. A night club Ollie was guaranteed to frequent was basically a promise of a bunch of tabloid covers with him partying again, whether that was who he was anymore or not.

Plus, it was located in the Glades. Something Thea would've thought a lot people would cringe away from, but starting it off with a benefit gala for Starling City's firefighters had been a stroke of genius. Probably Tommy's. It linked the idea of opening a club in the Glades, and partying there, with charity. With helping the less fortunate.

Who, if they were anything like Roy Harper, wouldn't accept help easily. You know, for a stuck up, rich bitch, you seem to spend a lot of time here in the Glades...

But the new jobs, a steady flow of cash and the added police presence that all but had to appear around a club supported by the Queen family in their city—on top of the club security that Ollie's big bodyguard was putting together—could only help. It was also a relatively short walk from Abercrombie's little house, which was good since he didn't have a car and shouldn't steal one to get to an actual job.

You think that's a good idea? Me, taking the keys to strangers' cars?
Harper had laid the sarcasm on so thick, but Thea couldn't help but relate to that. It was, after all, exactly how she'd responded to her mother and her brother both trying to save her from herself a few months back. It'd taken a car crash, some terrifying appearances in court, and five-hundred hours community service on top of two years probation to save her from that selfish, almost suicidal spiral.

Working at C.N.R.I hadn't turned out to be so bad; and Thea was almost a quarter of the way through her community service hours already, before long she wouldn't even have a real reason to be hanging out in the Glades. Except for her brother's club, of course. Sure, it sucked that she couldn't get her license back for two more years, and any arrests in that time might send her to jail, but she wasn't planning on drugs or parties anymore.

Thea didn't think she'd ever be able to make herself admit it, but Laurel was right. Working to help others—from petty criminals who couldn't afford high-priced lawyers to abuse victims, and worse in some cases—was 'it's own reward,' as she'd told Anastasia a few months ago. That Anastasia was on the last week of her pro bono sabbatical had gone unmentioned at the time, but that was probably because it would've made the new girl feel even more anxious.

She wasn't so anxious anymore. Where school used to make the world feel big and impossible to control—especially after a storm had snatched her father and brother away from her—working at C.N.R.I helped her learn how to take things one step at a time. That even the biggest of problems could be solved, step by step. Recognizing homework and tests as some of those steps had helped, too: she might actually graduate on time.

(Maybe. At least she really hoped so. Since she'd been avoiding telling her mother that a bribe like the one that'd gotten Ollie out of school on time might be necessary for her, too. But her teachers seemed a lot happier with her lately, so she could keep hoping... at least until the next midterm report card came out.)

Still, Thea wanted to help Roy Harper a lot more than she wanted to keep worrying about school. Never mind college. Ugh. So the first step for Abercrombie seemed obvious; getting him a real job.

Now, if only she could actually catch Ollie long enough to ask him.

She'd fallen asleep before he got back from his date last night, and even though he'd slept in later than her this morning, he'd slipped out before she'd gotten back from her morning jog. Really, the worst part about the C.N.R.I stuff had to be that she couldn't really party anymore or sleep in any day that wasn't Sunday. But, while working on Saturday mornings had seemed really unfair those first few weeks, but she'd liked getting lunch with Laurel there. And that was how she'd met Roy in
the first place... Granted, she should've been going to school most weekdays anyway before, but she hadn't missed a day since the Vertigo thing!

Thea hadn't even had a chance to ask Ollie how his date had gone. Or tease him about it. Raisa wouldn't tell her anything except that he'd had a good time. And she knew better than to ask her mom.

Now, knowing her luck, Ollie wouldn't even come home till after she'd had to leave for C.N.R.I—she hadn't had school today for some sort of professional day thing (she hadn't really cared why, since her mom wasn't meeting with teachers and it'd meant she could sleep in). But while Laurel wouldn't give her more than a comment for being late, Thea had learned that it was the sort of thing she shouldn't do at C.N.R.I especially. Actually, she hadn't been willing to even consider risking it yet, and didn't really want to start. What few comments she had gotten from her brother's ex had all been about her closing it a little close.

But Thea didn't want to not ask Ollie about giving Roy a job, either. She might see him near C.N.R.I again!

Thea sighed, but made herself turn the T.V off and get up. Obviously staking out the living room wasn't getting her anywhere. Why would it? Wherever her brother spent most of his time, it wasn't here at home.

*Knock-Knock-Knock.*

The knock came from the front just as she'd stepped into the front hall, and Thea turned towards the doors automatically.

Unlike her mother, Thea had never really seen the point in waiting for Raisa to answer the door. Not unless she was avoiding one of her friends. It wasn't like anyone dangerous could get through the security at the front gate and all over the grounds. And even though Raisa would've heard the knock through that baby-monitor-like thing she carried around, the kitchen wasn't that close to the front doors: it wasn't fair to expect her to run all the way here for a package while she was making lunch. And none of the maids the heiress had kept practically tripping on throughout her mansion-wide search for her brother were anywhere to be seen.

So Thea opened the door with a smile that she kept in place even though she didn't recognize the pretty brunette standing there, also smiling at her. "Hi, can I help you?"
"Hi," the woman replied, still smiling. "Thea, right?"

"Yeah," Thea replied, hoping if she kept smiling it wouldn't show on her face that she had no idea who the woman was. That was one problem with being in the tabloids with any kind of regularity: everyone knew what you looked like and who you were even if you'd never met them before.

"I'm Helena," the older brunette held out her hand and the teen accepted the handshake automatically. "I was hoping to surprise Oliver. Is he in?"

"No," Thea shook her head, finally letting herself wince. "Sorry. He went out a while ago."

"Well, drat," Helena frowned, shaking her head, still smiling. "I guess it's my own fault. If I'd called I could've met him in town instead of coming all the way out here." She shrugged, "I was hoping to drag him to Russo's again for lunch."

"Russo's?" Thea repeated, trying not to frown as the mention of the nice little Italian restaurant made the picture start to form in her head.

If Ollie hadn't told her his date's name when he left last night, she might've made the mistake of thinking that this was her, but her name was Felicity Smoak, not Helena something. So obviously this was one of Ollie's old hangers-on still trying to hang on even though he was trying to move on.

Or another fraud like the others that came around after The Gambit. Twelve-year-old Thea had been shocked when she heard Raisa sending away a woman that said she was carrying Ollie's baby. Worse, she was then told that that one was the third one in the two weeks after the boat went down. There had been seven of them all together, and none of them had been willing to talk to the Q.C lawyers, or agree to any sort of D.N.A test at all. After Walter had started to draw her mother out of mourning Thea wasn't too surprised to learn that the older Queen had had every claim investigated and disproved. It would've been nice to have a little niece or nephew; a piece of her brother living on. But instead it'd been a big eye-opener into how much she should trust complete strangers making those sort of claims: not at all.

"Yes, we went there for our first date before I left for Europe." Helena told her as she stepped through the narrow opening Thea hadn't realized she'd left in the entryway while she was thinking.

The teen frowned at the older brunette, trying to think of a way to get her go away without risk of another bad tabloid story. Something she wouldn't have cared about before all the Vertigo stuff, but
she wasn't entirely sure that sort of stuff wouldn't affect her probation and she really didn't want to risk prison or even just not being able to drive for even longer than two years. Well, one year and ten-and-a-half months now.

"Miss Thea?" Raisa's familiar voice sent a wave of relief through her.

"Raisa, hi," the smile she gave the housekeeper that'd practically raised her was real, and not just from relief. "Ollie's not coming back anytime soon, right? He's still busy with the club stuff? Right?"

The Russian-born lady nodded respectfully, her dark eyes still carefully watching the two brunettes, more the unwanted visitor than Thea after a quick, cursory once-over of the heiress. "Mister Oliver isn't often home during the day, no. And the club is opening tomorrow night."

"I'd heard about that," Helena agreed, still smiling at the teen: ignoring the Queen family housekeeper like Thea was the one that'd spoken. "But I'm happy to wait. Perhaps we could talk? I'd love to know what Oliver's been up to."

Thea hesitated, still not sure if throwing the older woman out wouldn't be a bad thing to do or not. It was starting to feel like risking a tabloid or two would be worth it. "Um, I kind of have to get ready for work."

"Oh," the older brunette blinked at her, then frowned. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

Thea shook her head, "Day off. Teacher thing. But I work—"

"That's nice," Helena cut her off, finally really looking at Raisa. "I'll wait in the sitting room then. I'm sure Oliver won't be long."

It very obviously wasn't a question. And Thea's temper was starting to flare under the worries for her future and problems with the law. Without all her partying, drinking and drugs, stuff like that was a lot more dominant in her mind. Especially in awkward social situations like this that got more awkward by the moment.

"Apologies, Miss, but the family isn't available for visitors at the moment," Raisa answered in the same voice that'd always soothed Thea, and did so again even though how firm her tone was right
now reminded her of the gentle disapproval she'd always received for breaking rules as a child, or things that even Thea's parents considered expensive. "I would be happy to take a message for Mister Oliver if you would like."

Suddenly something about the way the brunette looked between them then seemed very cold, even though she was still smiling it'd sharpened somehow, and made Thea very glad Raisa had moved up to stand next to her. Almost in front of her, actually, but maybe that was because Thea kind of wanted to hide behind her.

If this was what a lot of Ollie's other ex's were like, she really couldn't blame him for not moving on from Laurel sooner. And it made her really hope that how nervous he'd been last night meant Felicity Smoak was an exception to that rule.

"Alright," Helena finally nodded. "Tell him I'm sorry I missed him, but I'm back now. And to give me a call." She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a mini notepad, quickly scrawling out a series of numbers. "Here's my mobile."

Raisa accepted the folded up note, tucking it into her apron with another respectful nod, her eyes never leaving the other woman.

Thea wondered if the housekeeper would let her burn the note before Ollie got home. Or at least change a few of the numbers.

"It was nice meeting you, Thea," Helena nodded to her as she headed for the door.

"You too," Thea forced a smile with the lie. As soon as the door closed behind the slightly scary still smiling woman, she met her old nanny's eyes. "Can we not give him her number? Please?"

"I rarely do, Miss Thea," Raisa told her, shaking her head. "Though that one, I think I might ask security to not allow in again unless Mister Oliver objects."

"He better not," Thea grumbled, folding her arms. "She was creepy."

Raisa only gave her a small smile. "Will you be staying for lunch, Miss Thea?"
She hadn't been planning on it, but she didn't actually have to be at C.N.R.I until three when she was scheduled. Going a few hours early just seemed like a good idea when she had nothing else to do. She would've been gone already if she'd had a chance to ask Ollie earlier about the job for Roy. Which she still hadn't been able to do yet, so Thea nodded. "Yeah, I guess." Then as she followed the older woman towards the kitchen, she asked, "Do you know when Ollie's coming home?"

"No, Mister Oliver didn't say, Miss." Raisa gave her that kind smile again. "What would you like for lunch?"

Thea shrugged. "Surprise me." She considered a moment, then asked. "Maybe I should call him?"

Before the housekeeper could answer, they both heard the sound of the front door opening and closing again, and Thea turned back towards it.

"Never mind, I'll be right back," Thea hurried back down the hall, knowing that this could only be her brother because their mom was upstairs, and anyone else would've knocked. "Ollie?"

"Speedy?" he called back, sounding slightly concerned, which was on his face, too, as he came around the corner to meet her. "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah," Thea blinked, shaking her head because one of his brother's ex-no-one's really wasn't worth getting worked up about. "I just needed to ask you something," she bit her lip uncertainly, only getting more nervous as he watched her, waiting patiently for the question.

"Yeah?"

"Um... Oh, Raisa's making lunch, do you—"

"Actually, I'm gonna try and catch Felicity at work," Ollie interrupted, his slight smile getting a little bit bigger. Warmer. "She's not always good about taking breaks. But thanks," he explained, then asked. "Was that it?"

"No!" Thea shook her head quickly, wincing as she did so, but then just making herself ask, "I, um, I kind of have this pseudo friend that's looking for a job? I was wondering if the club's still hiring?" she finished nervously, and to her relief, her brother immediately nodded.
"Yeah. Of course. You'll have to talk to Tommy since he's the manager, but I'm sure it won't be a problem," Ollie reassured her, still watching her for a moment, before frowning. "Speedy, everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Thea nodded automatically, not sure how to put into words the thoughts still forming in her head.

"Are you sure?" Ollie asked again, still frowning worriedly.

"Yeah, Ollie, I'm fine," she tried to tell him, but he wasn't convinced.

"Shouldn't you be in school? Did you stay home sick?" He was pressing one of his big, callus roughened but warm hands to her forehead even as he asked.

Thea indulged him for a second, knowing she wasn't sick.

Her big brother was still frowning as he pulled his hand away. "You don't feel warm."

"There's no school today, Ollie. Conferences or something. I'm not sick. I'm fine, really," Thea insisted with a sigh, looking down as she admitted, "I just didn't like one of your ex's very much. Raisa got rid of her, but it was... awkward."

"Ex's?" Ollie repeated, his frown confused when she looked up at him again now. Though some of that worry was still there, so maybe he'd dated more chicks with crazy vibes than she'd imagined.

"Yeah, Helena something? Don't think she told me her last name," Thea shook her head, then looked back at her brother, who's whole worried face had darkened. "She just got back from Europe, I guess?" the teen considered uncertainly, not liking that dark worry at all. Not sure if it meant he was mad he'd missed this 'Helena,' or not. "She—uh, she said you went to Russo's with her?"

She hadn't said when, but Ollie obviously remembered her. He didn't look any happier at that, but he asked, "Did she say anything else?"
"Just that she missed you, and to call her, Raisa has her number," Thea wrinkled her nose, really wishing she'd just stayed in the kitchen and made sure their housekeeper didn't mention the woman to him. She really should've ripped the little note up and tossed it down the toilet.

"Okay, thanks, Thea." Ollie nodded. "You said Raisa's in the kitchen, right?"

"Yeah. Making lunch," Thea followed him down the hall. "You could bring Felicity lunch?" she suggested when they were almost there.

Ollie stopped and turned back to her with another frown, but it didn't bother her like the last few had; that dark worry was still there behind his eyes. He looked more confused than worried as he focused on her again. "What?"

"I mean, if she's really busy at work, right? She still needs lunch, but she might prefer eating there?" Thea shrugged uncertainly

Maybe she shouldn't really be trying to give her brother advice about his girlfriend when she hadn't even met the woman yet. But she didn't want him to forget that he was planning on a lunch date with her just because some scary old flame had flown into town. Especially when this Felicity seemed so good for him: she made him smile even when he was nervous and it was so cute...

Thea didn't want to see some other woman ruin that, and going by all his mistakes with Laurel and the sheer number of other women the renowned playboy used to screw, he might need the reminder. "Laurel and a lot of the other lawyers at C.N.R.I do that all the time, sometimes for dinner, too." She went on hurriedly, "And Raisa makes really good lunches, so..."

"She does," Ollie agreed with a grin. "And it's a great idea." Then he shook his head. "But I kind of want to get her out of work, Speedy. To talk about... stuff."

Thea frowned. "Didn't your date go well?"

"Yeah. Yeah, last night was great," her brother reassured her, his face looking a little lighter as he thought about it. "We just have a lot to talk about."
"That's good," Thea decided, nodding slowly, liking that lightness around his eyes. "Talking's good." She stopped him again as he started to turn. "But who's Helena?"

He frowned again, the light from talking about Felicity gone as quickly as it'd come. "She's just someone I haven't seen in a while, Thea. That's all."

"So she's not... I mean, you're not..." Thea bit her lip, not wanting to actually ask the words.

Ollie sighed heavily. "I'm not cheating on Felicity, Thea," he told her, looking more sad than angry. Not in his frowning expression, that didn't really change; it was in his eyes.

Like he was disappointed she'd think that of him, but knew he deserved it, too, after all the times he'd cheated on Laurel even before he and Sara Lance went down with The Gambit. All the stuff that twelve-year-old Thea Queen would've never heard about back then, but found in plenty back when she was searching for anything to help her not forget her brother and found what most of the world thought of him on the worldwide web. The beginning of her own downward spiral into around-the-clock partying, drinking and drugs. It hurt to see then, and hurt to remember now almost as much as that disappointment in his eyes that she knew was directed more at himself than her, but it was the truth all the same...

"Not with Helena, or anyone else," Ollie finished reassuring her.

Thea really wanted to believe him. Believe that he'd had to have grown up enough in the last five years to know he'd found a good thing and wouldn't screw it up. Because maybe if he could grow up and make something of herself, there was a chance she could, too. "Not sure Helena agreed with you," she told him flatly.

"You're probably right." He sighed, shaking his head again. "That's why I need to call her, okay? Make sure she knows it's over."

"Okay." Thea agreed softly, nodding tentatively still. Still a little worried about the force of personality that she hadn't quite been sure she shouldn't have been running away from. That she really hoped her brother knew better than to run towards.

"Go call Tommy," Ollie told her again. "Let him know about your friend. I'm sure we still need plenty of valets or waiters."
"Great. You rock," Thea told him sincerely, her smile coming a little easier this time, relief at the fact that she'd gotten what she'd wanted warring with whether or not the cute purse-snatcher she had a crush on could really be trusted to work honestly for her brother, and hoping that her brother wasn't going to screw his life up again all on his own. Or with Helena's help.

"Oh, there you are."

Their mother's abrupt appearance around the corner made Thea jump in surprised.

Ollie, to her annoyance, didn't look even a little startled. "Hi Mom," he greeted her with a smile and a kiss on the cheek.

"I have a question about your opening tomorrow night," she told him, but then paused to frown at her daughter. "Thea, shouldn't you be getting ready for work? I thought you were headed in early with the day off from school?"

"I will, Mom," Thea rolled her eyes. "After I eat lunch," she gestured towards the kitchen, then went up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to her brother's cheek. "Thanks, Ollie. Good luck with your date."

"Thanks, sis," he answered sincerely, before turning his attention to their mother.

Inside the kitchen, Thea wasn't surprised to find Raisa already setting an elaborate salad out at her typical seat for her. "Thanks, Raisa," she flashed an easy smile to her.

"You are most welcome, Miss Thea," her childhood nanny returned her smile with a warm one of her own.

Thea glanced behind her at the closed kitchen door before she looked back at the older woman and asked, "Don't suppose you already burned her number?"

Raisa chuckled, "No, Miss. That is Mister Oliver's business."

Thea frowned. "You said you don't always give him the notes when girls leave their number for
"No, not if Mister Oliver does not want them." Raisa told her. "Frequently he does not."

That made the teen's frown deepen. "How many girls just drop by to leave their number for him?"

"Only the most determined," the housekeeper shook her head. "Not so many since Mister Oliver's return, before Miss..." she frowned, and Thea remembered she hadn't heard the leggy brunette mention her last name either even before the housekeeper went on. "Before the young lady today. There have been some calls. As there always were before."

"But Ollie doesn't call them back?" Thea asked, her morbid fascination at just how many fangirls her brother had making her keep at it. Also, she couldn't help finding it funny that Raisa so clearly wasn't willing to refer to this morning's unwanted caller by her first name. Even if she didn't disagree; that particular honorific was reserved for family, not creepy callers. At least that was how it worked in Thea's mind, whether it was the truth or not.

"Mister Oliver was only rarely interested in their messages," Raisa confirmed.

"Wait," Thea frowned as she remembered her own days as a party girl, even curtailed as they now were. "Do guys call for me, too?"

"Only if they do not have your personal number, Miss." Raisa replied evenly. "Missus Queen insists that only your schoolmates be permitted to contact you thus."

"Course she does," Thea grumbled automatically. Not doing more than that, though, because she didn't really care.

She ran into a lot of people that seemed fun while she was buzzed and/or high, only to later realize that most of whatever fascinated her about them at the time had more to do with where she met them or what she was on than anything about the other partygoers themselves. She'd learned pretty early on not to give out her phone number, and it was a lesson that stuck even when she was out having fun.

In fact, thinking on it as she munched on some of her salad, Thea wasn't really sure she'd care if she ever went partying with Shane Colvin again. She knew Morgan really wanted Chris Fuller to
notice her, though, so it was worth it if it helped her B.F.F out. Even if she'd rather just get Morgan and Margo in to party with her friends. Though she was kind of curious about if Morgan's promise of being her plus one into *Verdant* had more to do with a guarantee of getting into her brother's club, or if Shane had actually grown a spine since Ollie caught him with her at the Christmas Party.

Now if she could get Roy Harper to agree to be her plus one, that'd be another story. The opening of her big brother's nightclub could lead to said big brother trying to scare another potential boyfriend off. Again. But a gangbanger from the Glades probably wouldn't find him as intimidating as the guy who was really only cool 'cause he was the head of the only band in her school, right?

"Mister Oliver," Raisa acknowledged him with a smile when he walked into the kitchen, and nodded to their mother right behind him. "Missus Queen. Would you like anything for lunch?"

"Yes, please, Raisa, a salad would be lovely," the Queen matriarch replied, and as she headed for the seat she so rarely took at the counter for informal meals instead of insisting their meal be moved to the dining room, Thea couldn't help but be please.

"Thanks, Raisa, but no," Ollie answered, shaking his head. "Thea said you have a message for me?"

"Yes, Mister Oliver."

He accepted the folded note that the Russian lady pulled from her apron with a small smile. "Thank you."

"Is everything ready at the club?" their mother asked before he could leave, making her daughter wonder what she'd been asking him in the hall, but she couldn't say she wanted him to run away right now either.

"Yeah," Ollie confirmed immediately, tucking the note in his coat pocket after a quick glance, he gave them both a smile. "Doors open tomorrow night." He shook his head. "Finally."

"Hopefully this time no one wants to burn it down," Thea commented, shrugging when everyone looked at her. "What? It happened before. Remember? They said on the news that it would've been worse if the Hood guy hadn't been there."
"Yes, well, thankfully the man responsible for that can't attempt it again," their mother replied with a grimace that melted into a smile as she nodded her thanks to Raisa when her own salad was set in front of her. Instead of eating, though, she turned her smile on her son. "I'm sure everything will go wonderfully, Oliver."

"Thanks, Mom," he returned her smile, then turned towards the door. "I've gotta get going. Enjoy your lunch, ladies."

"Tell Felicity we said 'hi!" Thea called after him, "And we can't wait to meet her!"

No answer came from her brother as the kitchen door swung shut behind him, but their mother and Raisa both chuckled lightly.

"He has promised to introduce us tomorrow night, sweetheart," her mother reminded her gently.

Thea sighed, "Yeah. But he's gonna call another chick while he's headed over to meet her for lunch," she shook her head. "That wouldn't seem right even if she hadn't been kind of creepy."

The small smile on her mother's face turned upside down. "'Creepy'?" she repeated as she speared some salad on a fork, taking a polite bite and chewing it as she waited for her daughter's response.

Thea didn't need to think about swallowing her own bite of food before answering, those etiquette lessons she'd hated at a kid still made those kinds of things natural. "Yeah, this woman just stopped by," she shook her head, stabbing a slice of cucumber with her fork to dip it in the bowl of dressing on the side. "I saw her walking up and answered the door 'cause Raisa was in the kitchen and, well, I kinda thought she might be his new girlfriend, but she said her name was Helena."

Her mother nodded, "And your brother is dating Felicity Smoak." She sighed, but then shook her head and reassured her daughter. "I'm sure Oliver knows what he's doing, darling. He's clearly happy with Miss Smoak."

"So why's he calling 'Helena' back?" Thea grumbled.

"We all have pasts we can't escape from, Thea," Moira shook her head. "And sometimes ignoring
past mistakes is even more of a mistake than the one made before." She nodded. "Perhaps your brother simply wants to make sure this woman from his past doesn't think she can interfere in future." Then she looked at their housekeeper with a small frown. "What was her last name, Raisa?"

"She didn't say," Thea answered before Raisa could, not wanting her to get in trouble with her mother for something she'd brought up. "She wanted to wait for Ollie to come home," she explained to her mother. "But... like I said, she was kind of creepy."

"And you didn't want to talk to her if she wasn't Oliver's new girlfriend," her mother said shrewdly.

Thea shrugged, "Well, yeah, but she was... really pushy, too. I almost thought we were going to have to call the security guys." She tried not to feel too put out when her mother immediately looked at Raisa for confirmation.

When the housekeeper nodded, Thea's mother frowned. "Well, clearly I'll need to have a discussion with security about who is and isn't allowed entry to the grounds."

"I can do that, Missus Queen," Raisa immediately volunteered.

"Thank you, Raisa, but I would prefer to make the point clear myself." She shook her head. "Our security staff shouldn't need to be apprised of the fact that our home isn't open to the public. I'd best make that clear to them before Oliver's club opens. Who knows how many of the clientele might otherwise make the mistake of thinking their visiting here uninvited would be welcome," she shook her head.

"Of course, Missus Queen," the housekeeper immediately deferred.

Thea wanted to snap at her mother for treating the woman that'd done most of the work in raising her like she was any other member of the hired help, but her mother's face softened almost immediately.

"But thank you, Raisa, for helping Thea," the Queen matriarch smiled kindly at her.

Raisa started to shake her head, still deferentially, but stayed quiet as her employer kept speaking warmly.
"Your diligence has always been a greater comfort to me than I can express, and I certainly don't mean to imply otherwise."

"I am happy to be of service, Missus Queen." The Russian lady bowed her head, but there was sincerity and warmth in her voice.

Seeing that the bashful woman was flattered by the eldest Queen's attention made the teenager glad she'd taken another bite of salad instead of snapping at her mother a moment ago.

"Now, Thea," her mother turned to her, "I'm sure I don't need to remind you how important tomorrow night is for your brother?"

"Don't worry, Mom," The teenager rolled her eyes, trying to not let herself be too offended. "I'll be on my best behavior."

Even if she didn't really associate nightclubs with any sort of behavior her mother might consider 'good,' Thea wouldn't want to do anything to spoil the night for Ollie and Tommy. And, remembering the way her brother's eyes had warmed at the mere mention of his new girlfriend, she wanted to make a good impression on her, too. So even if she didn't have the probation hanging over her head and hundreds of hours more of community service left to go, the youngest Queen would be willing to follow her mother's lead.

At least Ollie had promised they'd meet this 'Felicity Smoak' at the opening tomorrow night. If he hadn't, his sister might've had to do something drastic. Like find some reason to visit the I.T department at Q.C. Or create it. Dump a latte on her laptop, or something like that.

Chapter End Notes

And now we have another 'new' POV! Seemed like the time for it... :-)
Thea becomes more prominent a character throughout Season 1, and I couldn't quite see this scene playing out the same way it did in the show. Not when Thea knew her brother was dating someone that wasn't Helena. Maybe making Helena slip enough to bother Thea was a bit over the top, but our impressions of people are affected by more than just how they act: Thea was excited for Oliver's date with Felicity earlier and looks forward to meeting her, so some other woman showing up wouldn't be something she'd welcome. Add to that the stuff from the past (and really, I think there was a lot more to that comment in the first episode about being just like him than they decided to run with), and we ended up with a completely different scene.
Also, I'm not sure it was really obvious enough to mention, but I'm playing around with the timeline for this episode a bit. Helena visiting Queen Mansion was supposed to happen the same day that Verdant was opening, but that didn't work for the timeline I had in my head, so I've added another day in there.
The next scene is very nearly done, so who knows, maybe I'll have it out before the new year. Assuming I didn't just jinx myself and scare my muses off... *looks around*
Come back! Where are you going?! We're not done yet!
LOL. Seriously, the wait for this one shouldn't be too long. It practically started writing itself once I'd decided how this scene would work out. I'll try for before year's end, but if I don't make it: Happy New Year! :-D
Till then comments are always welcome! :-)


Mob Mentality

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains references to/thoughts about a murder-suicide involving children, if you prefer to not read it then skip over the section discussing the Bratva & the Kozlov family. It clearly marked with WARNING at the start & END WARNING at the end, with a brief summary in my ending A/N, so skip it if you think that it'll make you uncomfortable.
Without further ado: enjoy! :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver Queen's P.O.V.

Oliver knew that the terse words he'd had for the guard at the gate were over the top for the feckless playboy he still kind of wanted everyone to believe he was, but after a quick glance through the mansion's security cameras had confirmed that Helena had, in fact, left the grounds mere minutes before he'd gotten home, he'd had no one else to yell that.

Not that yelling at that kid was even remotely satisfying anyway. Oliver had never really paid all that much attention to who was manning the mansion's gate before, but that guy really didn't look much older than Thea. Even if "Jeff" just looked young, the vigilante could tell the younger man had absolutely no martial training in his background whatsoever, military or otherwise. Of course, Oliver wouldn't have expected anyone working for his family to actually attack him or even try to stand up to him when he was pissed off--other than Diggle, obviously--but just how much the kid had been sweating even before the billionaire had said anything to him hadn't been at all reassuring. It had, however, helped Oliver reign his temper in just enough to only be considered unusually terse: easily explained by one of his more unwelcome ex's being allowed anywhere near his little sister. But it wasn't what he required for protection around his family. Here in Starling, at least, guard duty meant more than just opening a gate sometimes and telling most nosy people to take a hike. Something he should've had Diggle look into long before now.

And Digg would have to be the one that followed up, too. Even if the real security team wasn't overly inclined to take the billionaire that didn't directly control their paychecks all that seriously, with or without the nervous gate guard that was probably still in college saying anything, they'd respect the former Special Forces bodyguard much more. Especially since Oliver highly doubted his mother had let it get around that Digg didn't report directly to her anymore.

But before he called the ex-soldier, Oliver had another number he should try calling. He did so once he was off the grounds, stopping his bike barely beyond the corner of that first turn after exiting the front gate. Atop the hillside that offered an almost picturesque view: because
everything looked small in the distance, even the tall towers of metal and glass scraping the skylines of Starling City itself. It was a place he liked to come sometimes even before he had any idea of how corrupt the place he called home was, and he almost didn't want to spoil the peaceful feeling that hung over the familiar spot by making the call here, but he needed something right now to help keep him calm and heading back to the Foundry for hours on the salmon ladder before making this call wasn't a feasible option.

"Hello Oliver," that familiar voice greeted, as sultry as ever.

Whatever attraction her voice might've had for him, however, was long gone in the wake of the realization that she'd dared to go anywhere near his family, knowing what he'd take that to mean. Even if he'd never told her that he was a Bratva Captain and thus knew how their types of tactics worked, the disloyal daughter that brought down nearly the entire Starling branch of the Italian mob probably thought intimidation and leverage were part of everyday life. After all, unlike most mobsters, she didn't differentiate between mobsters and civilians enough to not shoot gunfire onto a public sidewalk to hit one mobster walking among many non-mobsters. And that was just the time Oliver's mother was nearly shot; according to the S.C.P.D some of Helena's earlier hits were even more careless. It was why her case was one of the one's that the major case squad was handling even while they'd rather be hunting the vigilante: she'd been breaking the unspoken rule of not hurting innocents, and that meant the police had to intervene more so than they generally would if it was just mobsters killing mobsters. Their detectives researched mob deaths, sure, but when a mobster became a murderer on a much more indiscriminate killing spree, a whole taskforce quickly got involved. He supposed he should feel somewhat reassured that the vigilante task force did consider the Huntress more of a priority than the Hood, at least from the reports Felicity had shown him. But those same reports made it harder to talk to this woman when he had a personal reason to be angry with her now.

"Helena," he finally made himself say after several moments with his lips forcibly locked together, managing to keep his anger out of his tone. "Where you been?"

Well, most of it anyway.

And either Helena heard that anger, or she just heard the edge of that growl he didn't usually let himself use when he wasn't wearing the Hood on the end there, because she hesitated for a second before answering. "Um... Barcelona. Monaco. Budapest..." she paused another second, then added in a broken tone that made him remember how sad her eyes were when he'd found her at her fiancé's grave. "I just needed to forget who I was. And how much I missed you."

Oliver's temper was too tightly wound to fall for that though. "Like you missed Gus Sabatoni?" he demanded harshly, continuing after a moment when all he received in return was sullen silence. "I thought you were done with your father's organization, Helena. Because he was sentenced to consecutive life sentences in Iron Heights prison. You got your revenge." He finished firmly, still
hoping he could convince her of that, despite knowing why she was most likely back. And remembering all too well when she'd said she wanted vengeance, not justice, and that she wasn't going to stop seeking it.

Her acidic response confirmed what he'd already been forewarned of by Felicity's computers back in the Foundry. "He just cut a deal with the Justice Department to testify against the East Coast family," she snapped back, all the hurtful hatred she held towards the man slicing through the phone. "In forty-eight hours, Witness Protection will give him a new name, a new life, and he'll be off the grid forever! Untraceable!"

"I'm sorry, Helena," Oliver told her, not really knowing what else to say in response to that.

Not when he truly believed her vendetta against her father wasn't without merit, just not enough of it to ever justify all the people she was willing to hurt to hurt him. And still not wanting her to find out, if she did finally manage to kill her father, that having his blood on her hands wouldn't make her hurt go away. That it'd only make it that much worse.

"I'm sorry," he said it again more softly, shaking his head from side to side as he looked out at his city on the horizon.

Helena didn't reply for a long moment, but he didn't bother checking to see if the call was still active, knowing she hadn't said what she'd wanted him to call her for. After a very, very long moment she continued, her tone still harsh and hateful, "My father doesn't deserve a second chance—a second life. And I can't..." this time when she hesitated he heard her take a deep breath, and could picture the big blue eyes she'd have aimed at him if they were face-to-face again. "I can't take on a phalanx of U.S marshals... Not without help."

But he could also picture Felicity's eyes. Calm and bright with laughter and life that so rarely darkened because she wanted to see the world in the best way it could be, regardless of whether or not that was a standard life ever let it meet.

Oliver would've shaken his head even if he wasn't able to imagine how far from that better world helping Helena murder her own father would make him fall. "No." He told her firmly. "It's murder. It's not justice."

The silence stretched so long this time that he did almost check to make sure the call was still active, but he knew she'd want the last word whether she got him to agree with her or not. "Oliver, my father is a mobster and a murderer." She bit the words out. "It's not like you haven't killed men like that before!"
Oliver didn't let himself close his eyes, he kept them locked on his city. "And I tried to teach you to obtain your objective without killing," he reminded her. The words almost hurt to say because he knew, deep down, that each one was a waste of breath. "Without—"

"By using leverage," she cut in coldly. "By exploiting someone's weakness."

That wasn't what he'd taught her. That was what her father, what life among mobsters, had taught her.

But she went on before he could muster a response, words as cold as ice dripping down his spine as she finished, "I guess I'll just have to be a bit more persuasive. Fortunately? You have a family too."

"No! Helena!" Oliver snarled, but the beep he heard halfway through her name told him she was done with him.

At least with this phone call.

"Damn it!" he snapped with feeling, but didn't give himself anymore of an outlet than that, quickly hitting the speed dial for Digg's mobile. He transferred the call to his bluetooth before the first ring, and barely heard his friend answer over the roar of his motorcycle's engine firing up again.

"—having lunch with Felicity right about now?"

Despite having caught only the tail end of the question, it wasn't hard to guess what he'd been asked, and it was enough to calm him down a little bit, but only a little.

"On my way there," Oliver told him, not even trying to hide his anger now. "But Helena just paid a visit to the mansion."

Diggle didn't answer right away, but he probably wasn't wrong as he let partner stew for that moment of self-recrimination before he said, "Don't supposed you at least knocked her out." A statement edged with sarcasm instead of a question, because he knew a positive answer was unlikely even if the possibility had presented itself. Which it hadn't.
"She left before I got there," Oliver answered, ignoring the unstated implications. He probably would've had a hard time handling her there even if she had been that bold. It wasn't like Oliver Queen, partying playboy billionaire could just knock his ex-girlfriend out in the middle of Queen Mansion and not expect any questions to be asked. Not if his mother, Thea, Raisa, or really anyone at all, was around to ask those questions that they'd expect answers to.

"Uh-huh," was Diggle's unimpressed response.

"She was in my house, Digg," Oliver snapped at him. "With Thea. And my mother."

"What just making small talk?"

"No," he admitted with some relief as he sped around a wide corner that turned him almost completely away from the city even though it was the most 'direct' way into town, further down the road he'd get on the interstate, which cut straight through the city. "Thea thought she was a fangirl or something, I guess. Said she was creepy."

And Oliver would really like to know if that was just his little sister being protective of his new relationship, as her later questions had indicated, or if Helena really had become that much more unhinged. He had never been blind to her vengeful fury. Whatever Digg thought, sympathy wasn't the same thing as blindness. And considering the ex-soldier's own justifiable hatred for his brother's killer, Oliver didn't entirely understand why it was so hard for the man to show Helena at least some compassion.

Then again, he didn't understand how Helena could be so reckless regarding people who'd never hurt her, either. Even now, when she said 'take on a phalanx of U.S marshals,' she'd meant kill them all. Like they deserved that because they were doing their jobs: because they were assigned to protect her father. Sometimes killing guards was necessary, when Oliver went after someone on The List, but a bodyguard who knowingly worked for a criminal wasn't the same thing as cops many others like them.

Even Digg agreed with that (and they were both aware of the irony there). But when Oliver had needed backup to take on Cyrus Vanch and save Laurel, the bodyguard had been standing by: if Lance hadn't charged in when he did, then Digg would have. That, of course, would've meant Lance and the rest of the Vigilante Taskforce finding out there was more than one vigilante, that someone other than Helena Bertinelli knew who he was. (And that was really why they were so interested in the Huntress, when it came down to it.) But that was worth risking if it meant saving Laurel's life.
"Smart girl," Digg commented dryly. "She's not wrong."

Oliver ignored him. "Helena left her phone number. When I called her, she made a not so veiled threat. I want extra security around my mother and sister," he finished firmly.

"Way ahead of you, man," his friend reassured him, just as firm.

"Thank you," Oliver replied with a breath that actually felt like relief.

"It's my job," the older man reminded him.

And Oliver shook his head, "For not saying, 'I told you so.'"

"Day's still young," Diggle replied easily. "I got a couple calls to make." He hesitated a second, and Oliver heard it, so he waited for whatever it was his friend was going to say next. "Tommy's upstairs working now. Want me to talk to him about tomorrow night?"

Oliver grimaced, easily able to imagine how badly that might go over with his childhood friend. But, at the same time, Digg was in charge of security at the club, something that Tommy hadn't tried to change. "Fine. Just don't—"

"Bring up arrows and wanted posters?" Digg interrupted. "I'll try not to. But you should talk to him about that soon. You're lucky he didn't turn you in that night."

"He wouldn't," Oliver answered with only a little uncertainty in his voice. "He won't. He's just... mad. But I'll talk to him this afternoon."

"He might not stick around for that," the former soldier reminded him calmly.

"Yeah, well, that's what cell phones are for," Oliver sighed even as he hit his signal then turned onto the highway, speeding up the ramp and then onto the concourse with quick glances. "I'm headed to Q.C now, but I could skip lunch."
Saying that made the sky look grayer, darkened by more than his helmet's visor and the few fluffy clouds overhead.

Diggle snorted, "When you know Felicity already knows Helena's here? And she's probably wondering what you're going to do about it?"

Oliver shook his head, but his friend went on before he could answer.

"I got this, Oliver. Enjoy your lunch."

He thought about arguing, but he really didn't want to skip surprising Felicity for her lunch break just to go back to the Foundry to focus on Helena with Diggle. Especially since the only thing that should then interrupt their ongoing disagreement regarding the Huntress was what'd probably become an argument with Tommy. "Thanks, Digg."

"Tell Felicity I can't wait to watch her fencing lessons tonight."

Oliver snorted, "Trying to scare her off now?"

"Don't think she scares that easily," the bodyguard replied. "You haven't scared her off yet."

"Thanks," he replied with equal humorous sarcasm.

The likeness of which had really only become common around the Foundry, and then more so between the two men, when Felicity started working with them. Not because they hadn't gotten along fine before, for the most part, but because the serious atmosphere in the dark basement wasn't something Felicity seemed to be willing to tolerate for long before her mouth started saying things; with or without her permission. Sometimes he wondered if her slips of the tongue were more intentional than she led them to believe, other times he knew it, but it was just one of the many ways Felicity had managed to lighten the overall mood in the basement of what'd soon be his nightclub.

"Just don't do something stupid," Digg advised, "Like not tell her about the Huntress."
Oliver sighed.

Because Diggle wasn't wrong in his reading of the situation, and he knew it. That was why he kept pressing the point.

It was tempting for Oliver to just tell Felicity she needed to keep her distance for a while, safe from Helena noticing her. If he hadn't already taken her on a high-profile date, if that wasn't something that might've already made the tabloids he didn't read, he'd probably want to try it. But if tried to hide her now and Helena heard gossip related to her, that'd only spark her interest more. And he couldn't be sure she wouldn't decide that Felicity might make better leverage than threats towards his mother and sister.

Not when Helena would recognize that the appeal of where he'd taken Felicity was the security. If she realized he wanted to protect Felicity... that could be almost as bad as Helena realizing Felicity knew who he was. That Oliver trusted Felicity more than he ever had, ever could, trust Helena herself.

"Oliver?" Digg's voice forced him from his unhappy thoughts.

"Yeah, I'm still here," Oliver answered immediately. After a glance at a sign ahead on the road he added, "I'm almost to Q.C. Give me a call if anything comes up."

"Felicity will probably know before I will." Digg reminded him again. As if he could've forgotten that she probably already knew about Helena even without all his prompts.

"Yeah," Oliver acknowledged. Knowing he couldn't let himself avoid this conversation, so it wasn't worth arguing about. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay. Diggle out," the ex-soldier said, before the call beeped close again, the soft sound just barely audible over the roar of his engine. If the helmet wasn't specifically designed for it, it wouldn't be.

All the same, it suddenly felt too quiet.
But maybe that was just because of all the thoughts circling inside his head.

Thoughts of Helena, hurt and broken by the loss of her man she'd meant to marry. All that pain twisted around again and again by the fact that her father was the one who had him killed. For something she'd done.

Oliver had wondered, more than once, if the fact that her fiancé had taken the fall for her, unintentionally or not, might not be any even bigger factor in her desire for revenge than the murder itself. If the fact that her father had betrayed her by murdering her fiancé *before* she could betray him by turning damning evidence again him into the F.B.I might have more to do with how twisted and dark her feelings for the man had become.

It couldn't have been easy, after all, deciding to turn away from the benefits of that life. Deciding to betray her father in the first place, because it was the right thing to do. The Italian mob wasn't too different from the Bratva in their treatment towards traitors. Whether or not Helena, as a mob boss's obviously cherished daughter, was shielded from most of that and therefore most of her courage might be born more from ignorance than strength of character didn't change the fact that she had decided to turn away from that life and bring down the criminal operations in the process. Before she slipped up somewhere, and her 'crimes' were pinned on her fiancé; probably because nothing but concrete evidence would've convinced Frank Bertinelli that his daughter had betrayed him.

Whatever Helena thought of her father, it'd been obvious that the Frank Bertinelli did love her very much. Maybe what Oliver had seen of the mob boss's gentle handling of her had more to do with her grieving than how he'd been with her before, but he didn't think so. If Bertinelli didn't love his daughter every bit as much as it'd seemed, Nick Salvati wouldn't have been so viciously satisfied when he found her ill-hidden 'lair' that'd marked her as the one killing her father's men. Maybe Salvati had even suspected she might be the one talking to the feds initially, but hadn't dared make the accusation without being able to prove it. The complete shock on Bertinelli's face when he saw Helena aiming her crossbow at him that night months ago had been real. But, considering who he was and how his daughter had reacted to her fiancé's murder—switching from wanting her father sent to prison to dead by her hand—it really shouldn't have surprised Oliver when the man turned her crossbow on her that night.

Helena, however she'd happened to become someone who could turn away from all the luxuries the mob offered, maybe without really realizing the real risk involved in doing so, had come from that world. However much her father protected her from it, it was where she'd grown up and lived until just a few months ago. It was what she knew.

Oliver had hoped that once her father was taken into custody, with most of what was left of his operation destroyed by the Triad, she'd let it go...
'The police have him in custody,' he'd told her. 'He's going to jail and then on to prison.'

But she'd told him; 'I'm not going to stop.'

So he couldn't be surprised she was back.

'Oliver, you're not falling for this girl, are you? 'Cause I know you can't be that crazy.' Digg had been quick to reprimand him after that first date and the fight that'd revealed her to be the shooter that nearly killed his mother while she was taking out one of her father underlings. And the ex-soldier hadn't been wrong.

But Oliver had been Bratva. Still was, technically.

And he was born a Queen: the closest thing Starling City had to royalty. Unaware all his life that all that wealth and privilege had been built upon the suffering of others, because he didn't want to know that. If he'd grown up in that world, like Helena, he wasn't sure he would've ever grown the spine to turn his back on it like she had, his father's dying wish or not.

'I'm so sorry, I thought I'd have more time. I'm not the man you think I am. I didn't build our city. I failed it. And I wasn't the only one.'

Robert Queen and Frank Bertinelli weren't the same, of course, but they were similar. The main differences between them though were that Oliver's father had recognized his failings, and as far as Oliver had been able to figure out, Queen Consolidated was a legitimate business: not involved in any criminal operations at all since the Triad's Peter Kang hadn't fared so well after giving up the Omega virus without making them cut off his hand to get it. (At the time, Oliver really had thought he was showing the man mercy, but looking back he hadn't been surprised to find Chien Na Wei hadn't been so merciful while weighting the man's apparently limited worth.)

Almost everything Helena's father had built, on the other hand, was made up of criminals leaning on legitimate business owners at best, but mostly completely criminal enterprises. The likes of which Oliver would have targeted Bertinelli for eventually; his name was after all on The List, but he never would've considered what Helena had done. Killing so many to punish one man, starting a gang war to punish him, uncaring of the consequences...

'You can survive this. Make it home. Make it better, right my wrongs... But you gotta live through this first.'
Whether or not Frank Bertinelli would've died to protect his daughter before he found out she'd betrayed him and wanted him dead, Oliver doubted the mobster could have sacrificed himself for her. It wasn't the sort of honor that was expected of mobsters, and if he was at all inclined towards it he and Salvati would've attempted to intimidate Michael Staton instead of just killing him at the first sign that he may've betrayed them.

Then again, maybe Bertinelli didn't want to risk the evidence pointing to his only child instead. The rumor of that possibility alone could be devastating to a crime family. So, in ordering the hit on her fiancé instead of waiting for further proof of who the traitor was, Bertinelli was protecting his daughter, in his own way.

Oliver wasn't sure if Helena had ever—or would ever—realize that. She would undoubtedly say her father was just protecting himself. That he never gave any thought to her... but that was exactly what made Oliver sure she'd never been all that close to the uglier sides of mob politics.

Oliver had. He was a Bratva Captain after all. And though Anatoli had shielded him from some of those aspects of the Russian mob that the leader of the Solntsevskaya Bratva had kept his 'favorite' (and only) American friend away from, he'd still undoubtedly seen more than Helena. More than that, though, he'd never forget some of the things his friend had told him.

It wasn't very similar to the Bertinelli situation, but all of it had made Oliver think of the bookmaker's family in Moscow...

**WARNING**

Anatoli had warned Oliver that he might not want to go with him when they went to confront Kozlov, *This business will not be pretty, my friend,*' he'd said.

But they'd known that the man who'd made the grave mistake of stealing from the Bratva had to know that someone would soon be coming for him. And one could hire any number of guards and guns in Russia for much less money than the man had stolen. So letting Anatoli walk into that without backup wasn't something Oliver could do. Both because he really was his friend and
because Anatoli was the only reason he was welcome among the Bratva in the first place in those early days.

In hindsight, Oliver also knew he'd passed another test by insisting on going. That that choice had moved him in the minds of many from a particularly dangerous foreign fighter given too much influence by Anatol's friendship, to a recognized asset in Moscow. After that, Oliver could've decided to be Bratva for life if it was what he'd wanted. Had he made that choice, he'd likely be a Councilor by now: officially one of Anatoli’s most trusted advisors. Or at least as 'officially' as those sort of things were within the Bratva.

That wasn't at all the life he'd wanted though, and his Russian friend had known that. That the former K.G.B officer had both made sure Oliver himself recognized that fact, and still gone out of his way to facilitate his friend's future in whatever capacity he could was something Oliver would probably never really be able to repay. Not that Anatoli would ever let him say he owed him anything. Apparently saving him from Ivo meant their friendship was far above the favors and duties of the Bratva, something he'd been a bit surprised to learn early on...

But that night at the Kozlov house was still something Oliver would never forget. He'd been trying to prepare himself; steel his spine and his face into the indifferent mask that Anatoli had made sure he knew to wear while completing Bratva business. He knew that Kozlov was going to die that night, but that he was probably going to be tortured first because the Bratva both wanted their money back and to make an example of the man made fatally stupid by greed. In any criminal organization some criminal activity even amongst themselves was to be expected, the concept of 'honor amongst thieves' was more unifying principle than practice, but only fools let themselves be caught. Kozlov did get caught. He took too much for anyone to mistake as any mere bookkeeping error, so an example had to be made of him.

Oliver had known this, but he'd also known that wasn't the same still somewhat naive boy that'd kept his promise to come back to rescue Ivo's other prisoners and thereby earned Anatoli’s lifelong gratitude. Waller had seen to that.

The night hadn't turned out at all like he'd expected though. It'd been over before it began. Not because Kozlov had hired more protectors than Anatoli's select group could handle. He hadn't. What he had done was finish dinner with his family, tuck his children into bed, and then shoot each and every one of them in the head.

Oliver hadn't seen the children. Anatoli hadn't let him go further into the house once they'd found Mister and Missus Kozlov both dead in their living room, the fire they'd had burning in the fireplace just smoky embers by the time the Bratva party arrived. He had seen that Kozlov had obviously shot himself in the head after shooting his wife. Had seen that Missus Kozlov hadn't put up a fight. Had seen the cold tear tracks on their faces and the blood all over Kozlov that could've only come from holding his wife after he'd shot her, while she'd bled out, before he'd shot himself.
Had seen the silencer on the gun still clenched in Kozlov's hand. Had later read in the papers about a crazy man that'd murdered his whole family—two sons, two daughters, and his wife—then taken his own life all with the same gun.

Anatoli had said these things were sometimes to be expected. That once Kozlov knew he'd been found out, he also knew what would happen to him. And his family. That to one who wasn't a fighter and couldn't bear to see his family suffer—as they might have if he wasn't as easy to break as had been expected—death by a silenced gun was certainly preferable to torture eventually followed by death.

If he could've run, of course, Kozlov undoubtedly would have. But his attempt to leave Moscow without the Bratva knowing was what'd turned Anatoli's attention to him in the first place—and once that route was blocked by the fact that none of the Bratva would help him escape the Bratva, Kozlov's fate was all but sealed.

What'd bothered Oliver the most about it was the kids he never saw.

And that Kozlov had shot himself in the head, just like Oliver's own father.

**END WARNING**

That, though, was undoubtedly much like the brutal world Helena was born into. And unlike Oliver it wasn't a world she could simply walk away from. Officially, Anatoli still expected Oliver's allegiance on the other side of the world in return for his Captaincy, which forced Alexi Leonov to work with him when needed. In reality, however, Oliver knew it was highly unlikely Anatoli would ever actually summon him back to Moscow. Even if he were to fall from power at some point, the message Oliver would receive would be a warning, not a summons or any sort of cry for help.

Helena, however, was Frank Bertinelli's daughter. The mob boss's only family. Maybe he had been content to let her lead her life mostly sheltered from what he did, but that didn't mean he would let her leave his life entirely. Nor that he necessarily could. As his daughter, Helena could've been used against him all too easily: an obvious weakness for any enemy to exploit no matter how well
she was trained in self-defense. She'd clearly had some training before he met her. Oliver had taught her how to shoot a crossbow because it made her slow down and aim more than an automatic gun ever could. But Bertinelli must've made sure she was taught some self-defense, though he'd still been unwilling to let her go off into the city on her own that night Oliver had met her. Not that that was surprising, since 'someone' was going around shooting his men and the thought that it'd been his own daughter hadn't crossed Bertinelli's mind until he saw her standing over him with a crossbow aimed at his heart.

Remembering the Kozlovs, though, and remembering what Anatoli had said—about death being the only real escape from the Bratva—had made it hard for Oliver to even consider giving up on Helena. He had to think about it now, with her threatening his family rather than just his identity as the vigilante, but he still didn't like it. And he still didn't want to see her face after she realized her father was dead. After she realized she had her vengeance, and that it didn't help. That having her father's blood on her hands couldn't help her heal, it'd only hurt her more...

Oliver shook his head as he signaled for the turnoff that led directly to Q.C.

Helena wasn't just threatening him now, though she probably didn't realize her earlier threat to expose him would've put everyone he loved in much more danger than she herself ever could. Instead, she'd scared Thea and Raisa. And him, by her being anywhere near his family. Though he still had to wonder why she'd scared his sister instead of charming her.

Helena could act. She'd pasted on a pleasant smile for her father and every member of his organization for however long it'd taken her to gather the information that led to her fiancé's death and for months after that while she working against them. Killing them. She'd been charming even when she'd just thought Oliver Queen was 'the rich man's Lindsay Lohan' and the last thing she'd wanted to do was help her father close a business deal that might undo all her efforts thus far to destroy him. So why hadn't she tried to charm Thea instead of scaring her so that Raisa had sent her off?

It took Oliver what felt like a very long minute waiting for a red light to turn before he figured it out, his thoughts finally circling back to the obvious answer just as the light turned green.

'So she's not... I mean, you're not...'

The accusation had hurt. It still did just thinking about it. Not because she didn't have faith in him, per say, but because he deserved that. Like Felicity had said, Oliver wasn't the boy he'd once been. But he had been that boy. Had been Ollie. And that was who Thea had to remember, not just from her own memories, but from all the tabloid articles he'd deliberately just ignored as he'd acted out in any way he wanted. He could imagine her actually looking for them, after The Gambit sank, and being shocked at first. But less and less with each and every one. Until it eventually led to the
accusation that her big brother was judging her for being *just like him*.

Thea had loved Laurel back before *The Gambit*. And Laurel was used to being a big sister, plus Thea had always been easy to love back then. But it was highly unlikely that Thea and Laurel's warm relationship had survived *The Gambit*. Not when Ollie had 'died' while cheating on his girlfriend with her little sister. Not when Sara had died as a result. While Laurel wouldn't have taken it out on Thea directly, she probably wouldn't have gone out of her way to ever see the little girl again.

It was all too easy to imagine how much that must've hurt his sister, too, thank to him. Especially if their mother reacted as badly as Thea said; shutting herself away from the world, her daughter included, while she was in mourning until Walter finally pulled her out of her shell...

So Oliver couldn't really blame his sister for being worried he'd screw up again. Not when she'd seemed so happy to hear that he had a girlfriend that she hadn't even met yet.

...Though it should probably seem strange to apply any sort of official status to their relationship already. Right after their first—or maybe technically their second—date. It didn't surprise him that his mother and sister wanted that: wanted him happily dating someone. But it did surprise him that it didn't bother him at all. With how much commitment of any kind had scared him back before he knew what real fear was, their thinking of Felicity as his girlfriend already should probably bother him. But it didn't.

Maybe it was because Felicity wasn't rushing him. Sure she'd teased him about wanting to take it slow with her, wanting to do things right when she was perfectly willing to jump straight into bed with him, trusting that the weeks they'd spent working together counted as something on the dating scale just as much as their two dates did. Still she was willing to talk, and willing to wait for answers. That calm patience was almost as addictive as her bright smiles and laughter: because he didn't know how long he'd be wearing the Hood, and yet somehow he was sure she wouldn't mind waiting for him... Then again, she'd probably tell him that they didn't have to wait, but that wasn't what he should be thinking about now.

Any future with Felicity was complicated by all the problems of the present. Namely, now, Helena. Not because Diggle kept referring to her as his 'psycho ex-girlfriend.' (Despite both knowing that they'd barely dated for a whole week before she'd blown town in the aftermath of Oliver's intervention.) Had Oliver ever thought of Helena has his girlfriend? No. But he had cared about her. Still did, even if she couldn't say the same until she needed his help.

'*I guess you were right. I'm more interested in revenge,*' Helena had admitted that night, among other more hurtful things that what he'd already suspected deep down.
That was also the same night that Digg had sought him out at Big Belly Burger after Carly had turned him in, as he'd known she would the moment she'd taken his order. Probably making that phone call before she'd even placed his order.

Oliver hadn't been able to stay at the Foundry that night, after he'd had to watch Helena limp up the stairs as quickly as she could while favoring her injured side. He'd followed her out at a distance, just to make sure she didn't collapse on his doorstep, but he'd known better than to climb on his own bike as he'd watched her speed off. He'd had to go back inside to get rid of the Hood and his gear after that, but exercise had held no appeal to him that night.

Back then, after all, if Diggle wasn't there Oliver was completely alone, most of the time without even the sound of the computers that Felicity never let them turn off. And that silence hadn't helped him then.

Digg had though. For all the disapproval his partner-in-crime had for the Huntress, he'd still been there when needed, showing up to shake his head at the spiciest side dish that Big Belly Burger offered and the half empty large water that Oliver had managed to wash almost half the basket down with.

Oliver knew his heart hadn't been broken by Helena. Not when he'd known, before he even started trying to help her, that it probably wouldn't end well. But he'd still tried, and being with her had been nice when she wasn't focused on murdering her father, so he had been hurt. His heart wasn't broken, but it was definitely bruised.

Digg's words had still wrung true to him though: 'You know, Oliver, I don't think love is about saving or changing a person. I think it's about finding the person that's already the right fit. One day you will... You opened up, took a risk with your heart. The Oliver I met a few months ago would not have been able to do that. And when you meet the right person, you'll be ready for her.'

As he finally turned into the main entrance for Q.C's garage—going in that way instead of parking outside on the street and walking in through the lobby because it drew less attention—Oliver couldn't help but think that Digg's words fit Felicity surprisingly well. Sure he'd already met her; both that first time he'd listened to her talking to herself while on a mission for ARGUS and when he'd finally been able to speak to her and found her chewing on a red pen. But even when she'd known he was lying to her, she'd helped him. Then, when he'd needed her help most, she hadn't let him down.

Felicity didn't expect him to change. At least that wasn't what Oliver felt when he was around her. She didn't think he could or should be better, like Laurel always had. Felicity thought he was
better. And while the archer wasn't sure she was right, he wanted her to be. He'd like to be the man her eyes saw.

It wasn't like those last few years with Laurel, when he'd kept repeating the same mistakes and she kept taking him back but clearly wanted more from him. Wanted Ollie to commit. Wanted Ollie to grow up with her, when he wasn't sure if or how he could. When every way forward, towards Laurel's and his parents' expectations always seemed impossible to reach. When his mistakes and failures always seemed to make up the shadows of disappointment in their eyes if he was sober enough to see it.

Oliver had seen shadows in Felicity's eyes, but not aimed at him. She didn't see him as a failure. She saw him as a hero.

The thought made him shake his head again as he parked his bike in the V.I.P area, right next to the elevator banks. Which he headed into after a nod at the parking garage guard, who'd already called the V.I.P elevator for him.

Oliver knew he wasn't a hero. Didn't think he could ever really be one with what he'd been before. With all the mistakes, and decisions, he'd made. All the things he'd done. And hadn't done.

Oliver knew he wasn't a hero. But that didn't mean he couldn't try to live up to the image of the man he saw in Felicity's eyes. With or without the glasses she didn't really need.

Now wasn't the time for thoughts like that though.

Now, as he stepped off the elevator onto the I.T department's floor, Oliver had to start working towards keeping everyone he cared about safe. Digg was taking care of Oliver's mother and sister. Oliver, meanwhile, had to make sure Felicity Smoak stayed safe.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, a lot of introspection from Oliver here. Don't ask me where it came from, this scene was mostly supposed to be him reacting to the phone call, but he just kept thinking...

That being said, I thought the Bratva history was a fair connection to make to why Oliver was so lenient with Helena. We still haven't seen on the show where he learned Russian and got his Bratva tattoo: but, hey, they still have a whole season and a half to fit that into the flashbacks, right? If you skipped that scene via the warnings, the basic
summary is that Oliver went with Anatoli to kill a member of the Bratva who'd stolen from the Bratva, but when they arrived they found that the man had already killed himself and his own family rather than waiting to be captured, punished (probably tortured) and killed. Obviously not canon since we haven't seen any Bratva flashbacks since Anatoli left in S2, but I think it fits with how Oliver keeps trying to save Helena. At least more than it's just because he went on 1 and 1/2 dates with her and slept with her once. Personally, I don't actually dislike Helena. She's a pretty good villain, and I'm sure they'll eventually bring her back as a decent anti-hero. But Oliver's protectiveness of her (until she threatened Felicity) needed more of an explanation I thought, and I could see his past with the Bratva being it. Ergo, there it is. (And everything I'm basing that on is really either from the show, Wikipedia, or my own morbid imagination after too long on Wikipedia - it really can get scary.) Will it fall in line with whatever the show eventually gives us? *shrugs* No clue. Personally I do think the best point for him to meet up with Anatoli again would be the end of S4 in the flashbacks, over the summer going into S5. In a lot of the behind the scenes stuff the writers/etc. keep saying that Oliver's going to get progressively darker in the flashbacks till he becomes who he was at the start of S1, so that'd make the most sense to me, but we can only wait and see...
Oh, and I'm probably just too much of an Olicity fan, but I did get a kick out Digg's line in Vendetta, about finding the right person, coming right before the show switched to a scene with Felicity walking into Walter's office to show him what she found out about The List. :-D
Well, that's all for now. Comments are always appreciated. Let me know what you think!
Look! I made it before the new year, so once again:
Happy New Year! :-)  
~ Jess S
Felicity's P.O.V.

BURING! BURING! BURING! BURING! BURING!

Felicity jumped when her phone rang, the abrupt noise startling her out of her multitasking and simultaneously making her fingers fly through the steps of closing the windows she shouldn't have open here almost without thought.

She really shouldn't be trying to find Floyd Lawton, or keeping track of the news on Helena Bertinelli either, not while she was working at Q.C. But since she was at present still mostly hidden away here in the server room the temptation was hard to ignore. And needs must.

Her hand was halfway to the company phone on her desk a moment later, but the second ring didn't come from it. And it wasn't the right sound anyway.

BURING! BURING! BURING! BURING! BURING!

No, it was her cell phone. Which shouldn't be ringing here.

Oliver and Diggle had her numbers, of course. But the phone would be vibrating if it was either of them calling or texting, unless they used the emergency settings she wasn't entirely sure either of them had understood how to use. In the absence of an emergency call, here inside Queen Consolidated, her mobile phone would only vibrate. What should be the only exception being if the person calling triggered that emergency setting... except that wasn't what was going on because then the ringtone should've been an alert sound like the red-alert from Star Trek.
Felicity would never set her phone to that ringtone. She'd been sick of the long, drawn out sound not too long after the rotary phones first started becoming accessible to the public. The novelty of being able to communicate with someone directly from afar forced her to overcome her dislike, and the convenience made her keep the thing, but it'd been a marked improvement in her mind when phones with different sounds started appearing on the market. So she didn't need to look at the caller I.D on the screen to know who was calling her.

"What?" she answered sharply, not bothering to bite back her annoyance even though she knew that was what her oldest friend was aiming for with the trick.

"Well, hello, Felicity. How are you on this fine day?" Methos answered her with the genial personality and English accent of the ex-Watcher persona he was still using—Adam Pierson.

The personality wasn't actually as fake as the accent, over all he really was pretty easy going most of the time. Just like she was. You had to be, to survive adapting to age after age without your sanity making a break for it. And they were both used to adopting whatever languages and accents they needed to, in order to fit in wherever they happened to be making their lives at the time.

There were times when that was specific 'voice,' as it were, was supposed to tell her that she was talking to was a new Immortal that the Watchers were still aware of—an identity he hadn't deliberately lost just yet because the usable connection to the Watchers was just too convenient to drop without a good reason. Even though he wasn't the only one they had in the Watchers and never had been, it was useful to know exactly what the Watchers were willing to tell an Immortal who they'd known as one of them that'd supposedly then 'become' an Immortal. Though Methos's friendship with the Highlander, and especially Duncan MacLeod's own Watcher, Joe Dawson, also meant her brother was in no rush to abandon one of the few mortal friends he had these days that knew who and what he was. It always was hard not to cling to the mortals who not only found out the truth but actually accepted it, let alone embraced it: especially since all Immortals couldn't help but learn the hard truth that all mortals died at some point, and the ones you wanted to hold onto died sooner than you could ever like.

There were also times when her 'big brother' was just emphasizing that carefree attitude to deliberately aggravate her a little more than normal. Because while Adam Pierson pre-reveal to the rest of the Watchers had to be a bit more careful in maintaining a 'mortal' persona, afterwards, as a recognized 'new Immortal' and a friend of the younger Highlander, he'd given himself a lot more leeway. Though he'd always managed to be annoying when it was his aim, either way.
Felicity didn't let herself sigh, she could only expect more teasing from her brother if she did, and she didn't have time for his sense of humor right now. "Good morning, Adam," She replied dutifully. "I'm fine. I'm sure you are too. Now what do you want? I'm working."

Methos snorted, "Felicity, you're quite capable of doing your I.T job with one arm in a sling and blind, I'm sure. Talking to me on the phone while you type and check simple codes and answer emails or instant chats isn't going to hurt anyone."

That was true.

What's more, she didn't really have to worry about her job. She never had had to worry about it the way most mortals did: if she was laid off or fired or felt the need to quit, well, it wasn't like she didn't have plenty of places she could move on to. And her 'savings' could hold her over a lot longer than most small countries could last, without even touching the ancient treasures she didn't particularly care about.

Then again, she had no desire to leave Starling City anytime soon, but if someone at Q.C did threaten her job Oliver likely wouldn't keep quiet about her being fired from his family's company for anything less than a felony. But Oliver had enough on his plate with Helena Bertinelli back in town, and she was still expecting a call from him sometime soon about that. Her search program at the Foundry would've alerted him and Diggle, both there and by their phones if Digg hadn't checked into the Foundry hours ago. The same program had alerted her phone right away. Because Oliver's vengeful, psychotic ex-girlfriend's name and handle had made the semi-long list of 'high level' alerts that she didn't want sitting unanswered for any length of time. Ergo, she got the alert as soon as the S.C.P.D released the latest bulletin on her—which was at six o'clock this morning.

But also not at all what her old mentor would be calling about, anymore than he'd be interested in her search for the sniper that'd escaped Starling City's vigilante twice now. Unless Deadshot turned out to be not shot dead because he was like them, but she still had her fingers crossed on that not being the case. After all, Oliver had only shot him in the eye—mortals had survived that in the Middle Ages, occasionally, it was all dependent upon how deep that arrow went...

Felicity sighed into the lingering silence, "I appreciate the compliment—"

"Not a compliment," he corrected, and she could almost see his smirk. "A statement of fact."

"But you know I don't like taking personal calls at work. It's unprofessional."
That earned another snort from one of the very few people in the world that was actually older than her. "Right. Well then, I'm calling about Fournier."

Felicity didn't let herself respond verbally until she was sure she wasn't flinching anymore. "Who?"

"Don't play coy." Most of the humor was gone from his voice now, the stern older brother coming to the fore in his annoyance with her. "Mathis Fournier. Headhunter. Born in France in the late 1940s. Doesn't keep up with the latest trends too well as he wanders the world looking for heads to take... or he didn't, until he quit headhunting after his stop in Starling City 'bout a week ago. Am I ringing any bells yet?"

"One less headhunter in the world is hardly a bad thing, Adam," Felicity offered softly. She knew that wasn't going to cut it today. But there were worse questions he could ask.

She'd really rather he not be asking anything at all. Her brother never used to check on her nearly as often as he did these days, but then again all the conveniences of modern communication were to blame for that. Just like many mortal parents these days, the fact that he could check up on her from afar meant he did, sometimes more often than she liked. But better that than him arriving here in person...

"I couldn't agree more." Methos replied matter-of-factly. "Which is why you're supposed to take their head when they challenge you. Not let them go after proving you're the better fighter."

Felicity frowned. "Is that what the Watchers think happened?"

"No, that's what I know happened." Her teacher admitted, irritation dripping from each word. "His Watcher lost track of him after he arrived in Starling—didn't find him again till he was flying out three days later."

Felicity nodded, glad that he at least couldn't yell at her for being unaware of being watched. Especially since she had looked for the Frenchman's Watcher. "And he hasn't taken up headhunting again?"
Methos was silent a long moment, then he growled. "That's not the point."

"He hasn't, has he?" she pressed, pleased to have some confirmation of her reading on the younger Immortal she'd let keep his head. After all, that he could change, that he wasn't completely trapped in the Game yet, was why she hadn't wanted to take his head. So the confirmation that she'd been right and he had, in fact, made the effort to keep his end of the bargain for his life did mean something to her.

"Felicity, you can't keep letting headhunter's who aren't yet good enough to kill you go!" Methos snapped, all the centuries he'd been like a big brother to her shining through the words. "One day, one of them might get better and come back for you."

"Maybe. But it's my life, big brother. My choice."

It was an argument they'd had more than once over each millennium. The explosion of technological innovation in the last century, however, just meant everything seemed to happen more quickly—and sometimes more often, too, as a result.

Methos wasn't just learning she'd spared two headhunters in the last decade as they met up again after a decade or two apart. No. With the Internet, and more importantly the Watchers, he could keep an eye on her from afar as often as he wanted—and spend more time worrying about her than he had in any other millennium.

"Big brother," she went on in her mother-tongue. The language of ancient Carthage when it'd still been young and glorious, which most historians and linguists alike could only guess at since the Roman's ruinous conquest. "The boy barely had half a century of experience. And his heart wasn't in the duel at all. He was happy for the excuse to stop headhunting."

"And if you see him again?" Methos growled the words out, slipping into the same tongue as easily as he did every other.

As he'd once taught her how to do.

Felicitas knew she owed this man everything, that she likely wouldn't still exist today if he hadn't gone out of his way to take her under his protection and teaching millennia ago. But that didn't mean she had to let him control every aspect of her life.
"I warned him not to seek me out for the Game again. you know I always do," she reminded him gently. "If he ever challenges me again, he will die."

"Or maybe you will."

The ancient queen chuckled. "Perhaps," she shook her head. "Even if I do... I've lived a long time, big brother. If it comes to that, I'll die with fewer regrets playing the Game by my own rules than I would otherwise."

"I suppose there is that," the former Horseman allowed with a sigh as he switched back to English. After a very long span of silence, he asked. "Any other bomb-collar-wielding maniacs since the jewel thief? I heard he couldn't dodge your vigilante."

"The Hood caught him, yes," Felicity nodded, hoping her voice sounded right as she added. "You saw that in the news, too? With the way the media presents him, it's a wonder the police are still able to mount a taskforce to send after him."

"He's still a vigilante, Felicity. Whether he occasionally aspires to champion of the city or not," Methos reminded her. "And while we may not have the right to judge such things, societies with laws and the like are always better than anarchy."

Felicity did flinch at that, memories of all the chaos she'd seen in various war zones and the like leaving her unable to deny that. It wasn't always wars. Sometimes it was plagues. Sometimes famine or witch hunts or a particularly disastrous natural event: a storm, an earthquake or a tsunami. What was worse was when it was a combination of more than one—it took an area a long time to forget just one tragedy, when they piled on top of each other it became impossible for at least a generation to forget. Sometimes far longer still.

"But, hey, at least he's just going around shooting people with arrows," Methos allowed more casually. "If he creates a bunch of copycats, hopefully they'll do the same."

Felicity snorted, "I thought you didn't like getting shot with an arrow anymore than a gun?"

"Well, no, both hurt like hell, of course—as you well know. But as long as the head stays
Felicity shook her head. "I don't know. Personally I might prefer decapitation to burning again. I think I've burnt more than my fair share." She was almost surprised she could finish so mildly. Not too long ago talking about that would've made the words catch in her throat and it'd feel like the thoughts alone were suffocating her just like that thick, hot smoke had before her dress caught fire.

"Never suffered that end myself," Methos admitted mildly. "On a stake or not."

She already knew that, but that wasn't the point. This was the way they always talked about their prior deaths. Which were somehow always easier to talk about than many parts of their prior lifetimes—loves lost, especially—ever were. With some only some exceptions. So it wasn't surprising he didn't blink at her finally being able to talk about that death. It wasn't like it was even the most recent traumatic one; just the last to involve real heartbreak. And they both had plenty of practice playing light-hearted when it came to

"Count yourself lucky," Felicity told the older Immortal with a weighty sigh.

One that he, not surprisingly, recognized from the weight of his silence. Because both of them couldn't not recognize the toll of their very long pasts, and while sometimes a friendly ear did help, there were too many tales that'd already been talked to death. And a few that were best forgotten: in so far as they could be.

Knock-Knock.

Felicity jumped, too-wide eyes flying to the doorway at the polite tapping. "Oliver!" she blinked at him, honestly startled at just how surprised she was to see him standing there. She had been waiting to hear from him, after all, and it wasn't exactly surprising that he'd decide to just show up at Q.C instead. It was sometimes terrifying—how all-consuming mere thoughts of the past could be...

"Nope, I'm Adam," Methos answered her through the phone, and then the crafty, nosy bastard sounded far too intrigued as he asked her: "Who's 'Oliver'?"

The man in question was giving her a warm smile that almost hid the worry in his eyes as he sat down in one of the chairs on the other side of her desk, signaling to her that he could wait.
Except she couldn't keep talking to Methos in front of him. For a random person she could switch to a little known dialect of some language they wouldn't know and trust that their own ignorance would embarrass them into not asking too many questions afterwards. But Oliver would ask questions. She'd told him to.

"Uh, sorry, Adam. I have to go," Felicity said, ignoring her new love-interest's immediate frown.

"Who's Oliver?" Methos persisted obstinately, obviously having heard more than just surprise in her tone. "New boyfriend?"

How did he...

Felicity frowned. "Goodbye, Adam." She ended the call, switching her frown for a small smile at the man across from her. "Hi Oliver."

"Hey," he replied, somehow sounding both happy and worried all at once. His earlier smile was a frown now, but it was still full of that warmth that reminded her of the sun. "You didn't have to do that. I could've waited."

"Oh, I really didn't want to talk to him anyway," she reassured him quickly, shrugging as she set her cellphone on the desk.

Oliver blinked at it. "I thought you didn't answer your cell at work? That Q.C didn't allow it?" he raised an eyebrow.

Felicity sighed. "It's still set to let emergency calls through. I told you how to do that," she grimaced. "And my brother knows how to override it if he wants to. Even if it's not an emergency."

"Brother?" Oliver blinked at her.

And just how surprised he looked for a half-second there made her realize her mistake. Felicity Smoak didn't have a brother, did she? Felicitas did, in so far as any Immortal ever could. Dammit, what was her current relationship to her teacher on paper these days anyway?
She couldn't remember the last time she'd slipped up this badly. Because even though that surprise hadn't been there for even a full second, it'd still been there. And it told her that Oliver had looked into her—as she'd known he would have—and he probably hadn't seen anything about a brother.

Because as Felicity Smoak she didn't have one. Was he her 'uncle' now, or her 'cousin'?

Marie Smoak had had a brother, though only after Felicitas assumed her dead friend's identity to raise her daughter. But the man that'd been Donna's honorary uncle, and then uncle to both 'Smoak sisters' couldn't be Felicity's great-uncle. He looked far too young. So she hadn't even tried to fabricate anything after the missing persons report for an elderly, absent-minded uncle that was never found. He'd been so busy meddling with the younger Highlander's life in that timeframe that she hadn't seen any reason to bother creating another identity for him that likely wouldn't be used... so she hadn't given them any relationship at all, had she?

"Felicity?" Oliver looked more worried now. "Everything okay with your brother?" His tone was free of that earlier surprise, but she still remembered it, and it's absence now meant he'd noticed her reaction, too.

Dammit.

Felicity closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then smiled as she looked at him again. "Yeah. Just an old argument."

Oliver nodded slowly. "Anything I can help with?"

"No," She snorted, chuckling as she shook her head. "Thank you though."

He nodded. "His name's Adam?"

Felicity forced a strained smile at that. "You didn't come here to talk about my brother, Oliver." She raised a knowing eyebrow when he started to shake his head. "You didn't even know I had a brother."

For a long moment it looked like he might not let it go, and she knew that even when he sighed and
shook his head that this wasn't going completely away.

"You already know," he said as he realized she already knew why he'd been doing a not so great job of hiding the fact that he was worried when he got here.

Because of Helena Bertinelli. A.K.A 'The Huntress.'

Felicity nodded, "Yeah, I got the alert this morning."

Oliver's frown returned, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Figured you'd see it at the Foundry soon enough," she shrugged, not letting herself wince at the fact that the motion seemed to be just as instinctively ingrained as she'd feared. Though that was neither here nor there, but her answer wasn't a lie either.

Actually, that detection grid she'd set up on the system in the Foundry wasn't the only one that sent alerts to her phone. She had more than a few setups going--constantly searching--well before Oliver had first walked up to her desk. Several were searching for other Immortals, either by their reputation among the Immortal community or others if only because the Watchers had, with good reason, labeled them dangerous. Some other programs tracked the Watchers themselves, too; something that was far easier than it once was, because the Watchers themselves kept such good track of each other. They always had, of course, as knowing where their people were was a large part of knowing where the ones they were tracking happened to be, too, but these days modern technology made it almost too easy. Setting up yet more systems for Oliver's mission had seemed like a matter of course, even before she'd started searching for Deadshot specifically, she'd been keeping track of the crime in the city because some criminals made much more moral targets for Oliver than many of the names in 'The List.'

But when she'd seen what the low-level alert was for this morning, she hadn't wanted to call him about it. She hadn't wanted her first phone call to him following their date to be about his ex-girlfriend. Maybe that was a little unfair or even immature of her, since she had been expecting him to call her about it, but it wasn't like she'd hidden it from him.

"It wasn't like it was something happening this morning," Felicity reminded him hesitantly when he kept frowning. "It was about a police report from last night. It just hit the S.C.P.D's system this morning." She paused, then offered, "I haven't worked all the bugs out of the matrix for the general communications systems yet: not for anything other than certain keywords. It's coming along, but it'll take a little while. Still, I could set our computers up to alert your phone, too, if you want?"

When he visibly thought about it, she added quickly, "But it'd have to be a different phone from
your personal one. A burner, maybe? I could set it up?"

Oliver shook his head. "We have some spare burners back at the Foundry. I'll get you the numbers." He didn't bother asking why it had to be a different phone from his personal one. Either because he could seeing the practicality of not wanting to receive messages related to or referencing his vigilantism on his the phone with an open account under his name, or he simply trusted her judgment in the technological area that'd really become her domain the moment she'd shaken his hand. Though he wasn't really a slouch himself, even if he had had to keep coming to her for help with stories that seemed to become increasingly more unbelievable each time she saw him.

Felicity nodded, biting her lip. Not sure if she should try to correct her earlier mistake or focus on the present. Not at all used to being so unsure. But she didn't want to lie to him, and that made saying anything hard.

"Have you taken your lunch break yet?"

"Uh-no?" She blinked at him, then glanced at the clock, stunned to see just how late it was. "No, I haven't."

"Great," Oliver stood, offering her his hand over the desk. "Let's go."

The Immortal accepted the gallantry without thought, more amused by it than anything else. "I thought we were going to dinner somewhere, tomorrow, before the club opens?" she teased, nodding her thanks while he helped her into her coat.

That was the 'next' date they had planned, but plans could change. And even knowing why they were changing now it didn't really bother her. The return of an old, somewhat dangerous flame wasn't a bad reason for the change. Actually, since he'd come to see her in person and was willing to go somewhere with her (rather than deciding to put everything on hold for the first hurdle they'd encounter since they started seeing each other), this was potentially a very good sign.

"That's tomorrow," Oliver shook his head, tucking her arm through his and leading her from her office. "And we really should talk about this now."

The clear plea (and worry) in his voice made her instantly fold. "All right," Felicity acquiesced, glad to see that most of her co-workers weren't back from their own lunch breaks yet. Stevenson
was in his office, but as usual he was turned towards the little television that he watched much more than any of the Q.C computers. Still, she waited till they were in the elevator before she suggested, "We can go to Belleza Días."

"That's the new Spanish cafe, right?"

"That's the one," Felicity confirmed. "It opened a few years ago, but it'd still seem new to you, of course."

The cafe was a little further away from Queen Consolidated than the normal lunch crowd would wander, since there were a bunch of places a lot closer and it was on the pricier side, too. Both were factors that should make it less likely for them to run into anyone else from Q.C, which would be good both because he clearly wanted to talk privately somewhere they wouldn't be interrupted, and because it shouldn't lead to their relationship becoming tabloid fodder today. The gossip wouldn't bother her too much, and the devices she wore to make sure a Watcher wouldn't be able to take her picture if they happened to spot her talking to another Immortal meant the paparazzi were going to hate her anyway.

Oliver nodded. "Okay. My bike's in the garage."

The Immortal couldn't help but roll her eyes. "Oliver, it's only a few blocks away." When he blinked at her, frowning slightly, she sighed. "I can meet you there?" she offered, gesturing to herself. "Sorry, but I'm not exactly dressed for riding."

While her heels wouldn't precisely be an issue, since all she had to do was make sure her feet stayed in the right spot, her pencil skirt wasn't at all designed with riding astride anything in mind... and that was what the small, amused smirk on his face was for, wasn't it?

Felicity rolled her eyes even as Oliver shook his head.

"It's still pretty cold out." He objected gently, and hit the button for the lobby just as they were about to pass it on the way to the V.I.P level of the garage. In the V.I.P elevator that his fingerprint gave him automatic access to their journey wasn't interrupted by any other stops. They'd never taken him out of the system, actually—Missus Queen had apparently reacted very badly to the idea when it was broached several years ago. Such sentiment was rarely wise when it came to security features, but it very convenient for Oliver since he wasn't actually dead.
Felicity frowned, but forced the expression off her face as she let him lead her out of the elevator and across the lobby to the front reception desk, pretending she didn't feel all the eyes on them—on her now only because she was *with him*—as he asked the receptionist to have a car brought around.

"Right away, Mister Queen," the girl behind the desk told him perkily, doing a better job than almost everyone else in the lobby at not being too overt with the speculative, judgmental look she shot the I.T girl's way.

But Oliver was leading her out of the building barely a minute later, out to the company car and driver that *Queen Consolidated* apparently kept stored away in the garage.

While the rapid means of transportation that'd come into being in the last century or so had more uses than Felicity could count, the attitude that it seemed to have engendered in the latest generation amazed her. Granted, in eras past the offer would have been a matter of propriety—it wouldn't do to expect a young lady to walk the streets unaccompanied, after all. And Oliver, at least, was only insisting because he didn't want her to be cold, not because he was lazy or thought she couldn't walk half a dozen blocks in a short amount of time. Though, then again, the billionaire might well be the opposite end of his generation's spectrum: among those who wanted to do *everything quickly* because they could. That, too, while sometimes necessary, could become tiresome from time to time.

The picturesque little cafe had only a few other diners scattered around, as expected. So they were soon seated, menus in their hands once again.

"Thank you," Felicity flashed him a smile as he held her seat out for her, then cocked her head to the side as she watched him sit down across from her again. She studied him a moment, instead of looking at the little lunch menu the hostess had handed them as they'd entered. "You know, I don't usually eat out this much."

"No?" Oliver replied, the small smile on his face still not managing to hide his worry. "Can't say I do either."

That worry wasn't really obvious, per say. If you weren't looking for it, you might not see it. But she was looking. That, and many of Oliver's traits and mannerisms reminded her of those precious few men she'd known very well, so it might as well be spelled out across his forehead for her to read.

"Dinner last night, lunch today, dinner and the club tomorrow," Felicity shook her head, then rested her chin on her hand as she folded her elbow atop the table. "Are we making up for lost
"Don't forget dinner tonight," he teased her, closing his own menu and setting it aside after that quick glance through it.

The Immortal raised an eyebrow, "I thought we were 'working' tonight? Is that before or after dinner?"

"Up to you," Oliver shrugged, looking amused. "You gotta keep your strength up."

"Very true," Felicity's lips quirked, unable to not be amused at the idea that she was the one that needed the meager strength one mere meal provided for at most a few short hours of swordplay. Or sparring—or sparring, she still hadn't entirely decided which way she should play her skills. A natural affinity left a little too long to rust or a hobby from childhood reluctantly revisited with perhaps some excessive clumsiness thrown in?

"Buenas tardes," a dark-haired woman so petite she made Felicity feel tall stopped beside their table. "Me llamo Elena. ¿Cómo está?"

Felicity took her in with a quick glance. While the woman might have some Mayan ancestry the accent she was attempting with her oft practiced greeting harkened more to Iberian than Mexican, which was somewhat interesting as the vast majority of Spanish speakers in the United States spoke with the dialect specific to the nation's southern neighbor. But she didn't speak with the familiarity of one whose tongue knew the words well enough to twist them with little thought, even if the tired air she was trying to hide with a smile had more to do with her incorrect congregation for addressing two versus one, it was more likely that a reply in the same language would put her on edge rather than relax her. That the Immortal's last time where that dialect hailed from had ended quite painfully was neither here nor there. So the blonde returned her smile with a kind one of her own, "Very well, Elena, and you?"

As intended, the returned smile set the tired woman a little more at ease. After all, it was always easier to serve friendly, considerate people than brash, impatient ones. "Very good, Miss, thank you," she gave a nod that was almost a bow of her head. "What can I get for you guys?" After acknowledging that they both wanted coffee and taking their lunch orders, too, the short woman was off again, leaving the pair mostly alone.

"You haven't taken a vacation in a while," Oliver said almost as soon as the waitress was gone.
Felicity blinked at him, a bit bemused. "No, I haven't," she agreed, brow furrowing as she wondered why it was that the men in her life inevitably seemed to resort to sending her away from potential problems as a matter of course.

It was both better and worse in Oliver's case. Because he really knew nothing about her—ergo, he didn't know she could take care of herself. But he'd also not known her, nor been dating her, nearly long enough to have much say in her travel plans. Especially since he wasn't going to ask her to go somewhere with him: no, he wanted her away from Starling City while he wrestled with his ex-girlfriend. Not a fantastic starting point for the first fight in any relationship...

"There's a tech conference coming up in Coast City—"

"At STAR Labs, yeah," Felicity nodded. "I went to it last year. Doubt it's changed much, they're still developing their particle-accelerator, and that looked like it still needed a few more years work, so..." she shrugged, cocked her head to the side. "Wouldn't think that it was something you'd be very interested in anyway."

"No, I couldn't go," the vigilante admitted honestly, the discomfort that was just barely there on his handsome face telling her he knew better than to ask this, but he was going to push it anyway. "But I thought you might like to?"

"Without you," Felicity clarified because it needed to be said, then shook her head as soon as he nodded. "Because you're going to be running around Starling after Helena Bertinelli."

Oliver sighed, but didn't say anything in response as the waitress returned with the little tapas the cafe was known for to nipple on while they waited for their actual meal and a promise that there coffees would be ready very soon. "I'm sorry," he apologized dutifully as soon as she was out of earshot again. "But Helena's... She's dangerous. She'll stop at nothing to get back at her father and —"

"And she knows about you," Felicity interrupted again, nodding as he frowned at her. "It's not hard to put together. You were dating her, as you, in the same timeframe that the Hood had a female sidekick." She shrugged, reaching out to pick up a tapa. "Even if I wasn't paying attention to the vigilante blogs, it's in the S.C.P.D's file. I'm kind of surprised they didn't question you about it."

"Lance warned me off before that," Oliver shook his head, then his brow furrowed even as he automatically picked up a tapa, too. "Wait, we just looked at the Dodger investigation—"
"You did," Felicity nodded as she cut in again. "I tend to look at a lot more than that. And keeping an eye on that case seems like a good idea, doesn't it?" she asked him as she took another bite out of her tapa.

Maybe it was something she wouldn't have the sheer nerve to do if she was a mortal, with the limited experiences of a young woman who'd graduated from M.I.T only a few years back before moving to Starling City to work as a tech expert for said city's largest employer. But she wasn't that girl. Or at least she wasn't just that girl. And she'd learned a long time ago that her 'type,' as Methos had dubbed them as soon as the designation came into existence, tended to need looking after. Ironically, that was when her brother had first started doing his best to help her open herself up to the idea of romance again. A real role-reversal for him from times past, which could play out in too many different ways to predict with any sort of certainty.

"That's...good," Oliver finally decided, pausing again as their waitress returned with their coffees.

Both of them shook their heads when she asked after them needing anything else. Though from the looks of it, the billionaire would've preferred something stronger than coffee right now. Always a bad thing at lunch time.

"Thanks," Felicity smiled at the tired woman, taking a sip of her coffee while her date went on as soon as the waitress had hurried away again.

"Felicity, she's already threatened my family." He shook his head roughly in frustration. "Digg's put extra security on them, but—"

"Oliver, she doesn't have any reason to know who I am. We've been on two dates in public, and I don't recall seeing any camera flashes at either restaurant." The Immortal hesitated, then sighed. "And Oliver, even if my picture was out there?" she shook her head. "You can't protect me from everything."

"I'm not—"

"And I," she cut him off again, needing to say this, "I am the one that decides if I need protection."

Oliver's brow furrowed even more as he visibly fought with his own frown, then he finally shook his head and met her eyes again. "Felicity, I don't want anything to happen to you."
"And I appreciate that," the Immortal told him. "I don't want anything to happen to you either, but," she held up her hand to stop him when he opened his mouth. "But I still have to respect your choices. Just like you have to respect mine. Or this?" she gestured between them, then reached across the table to catch his hand. "Us? Can't go anywhere."

It was too early for this, really, but it still had to be said at some point. She'd let her wariness of scaring a prospective partner off silence her more than once in the past, the most recent time with terrible consequence. So it was relief when he caught her hand before she could withdraw it, returning the gentle squeeze she'd given his with even more careful care.

"You're right." Oliver told her calmly, squeezing her hand again. "But I'm right, too, okay?" He shook his head. "I made Helena what she is. I tried to help her and—"

"You can't help everyone, no one can." Felicity told him softly. "And some people don't want to be helped."

"Yeah." He nodded, clearly not liking that he had to agree with that statement. It was always a very hard lesson for anyone to learn.

"So you've seen her already?" Felicity raised an eyebrow when he frowned. "When she threatened your family?"

That didn't quite add up in her head. But then again it had already crossed her mind that her new boyfriend might have a slightly too strong chivalrous side. With how protective he was of anyone even speaking ill of his mother, how much he hated admitting they had to keep looking into whatever Moira Queen and Malcolm Merlyn were up to, it was hard to imagine him letting someone who'd threatened his family with harm walk away without significant extenuating circumstances...

"No, she..." Oliver grimaced, his hold on her hand tightening a little too much, till he noticed and immediately let go.

Felicity withdrew her hand with deliberate unhurriedness to ensure he didn't think she was pulling away as she folded both her hands on the table in front of her. It took significantly more pain than anyone could inflict accidentally for her really notice it, and while he might've left a bruise on her hand were she mortal, her Quickening was already healing away the aggravation and she wasn't even sure it'd been enough to cause more than that momentary pain anyway. "She what?"
Oliver's grimace had given way to relief at her lack of a pained reaction, but her reminder brought his aggravation back. "She stopped by the mansion while I was out. Talked to Thea and left her number with Raisa." He shook his head. "Raisa didn't like her. Thea didn't either."

The housekeeper that'd been like a second mother to both Queen children being protective wasn't at all surprising. From the reforming party girl, however, such a level of good judgment was somewhat unexpected. Though not in any way bad.

It was a bold move for the self-styled 'Huntress' to make. Going to his home directly, rather than leaving a message from afar by telephone. Was that because the woman had little real care for her own safety, or an accurate reading on just how far she could push Oliver Queen?

"I called her... She wants me to help her, with her father." Oliver sighed. "When I refused, she made a not so veiled threat."

Felicity nodded. "And you think she'll go through with it? Rather than trying to go after her father by herself?" she took a sip of her coffee as she finished, and watched him do the same as he thought through his response.

"I think she'll have to try something." He admitted. "She couldn't get to him in prison. Not herself."

"And she's angry that he's getting a deal now?" Felicity guessed, well able to imagine the mortal woman's fury.

She'd known that sort of fury herself, hadn't she? Each time Cassandra had gotten away from her, though none so towering as that first time: when she would've traded anything to see the woman's crimes undone.

The difference was Felicitas still retained enough of her reason to forgive her mentor, rather than clinging to the feeling of betrayal that could all too easily be inspired by Methos' interference in the matter. That, and perhaps simple circumstances—upbringing and duty. Felicitas had been raised to rule over a nation. Had ruled Carthage for many years before she became an Immortal. Had spent her whole life striving to put the well-being of her people first, far ahead of anything she allowed herself. The only real exception she'd made back then was when she'd convinced her husband to let her legally adopt his late sister's children after she'd died, making them the princes and princess of Carthage when it might've caused a political imbalance that could've been difficult to whether out. But that one slightly selfish choice hadn't been entirely selfish, as she was seeing to her city's future by finding the heirs her own barren body could not make. And all that was before that life was taken from her by a woman consumed by that unreasoning spirit of vengeance that'd so baffled her
upon their first meeting. Had Methos not spoken for the madwoman when she'd first arrived in the city and declared him a murderer, Felicitas would have sent her on her way. But that didn't mean that what the madwoman had done then, or any of her crimes thereafter, were the fault of the older ancient... no matter how willing he was to accept that burden of blame.

"If it's a head you need now, you can take mine!" her mentor's painful words from long ago still sometimes echoed inside her head, almost as clearly as the sight of her sword at his neck and his own delved into the ground by his own hand. "I won't fight you."

She'd tried to flinch away when he'd shaken his head, making the sharp edge of her blade slice some of the skin of his neck and draw blood.

He hadn't let her—he'd continued to hold the blade there with his equally bloodied hand. "But I won't watch you become her. You're better than that, Felicitas of Carthage. Better than both of us."

Finally, he'd let her sword go, nodding sadly as she immediately dropped it. "And you know it. You have to."

When her knees gave way beneath her, Methos had knelt beside her, holding her as rage had to give way to all-consuming grief upon the marble floor of her first home. The same home that that spiteful woman had sought to ruin, and had in too many ways succeeded...

"Felicity?" the concern in Oliver's voice brought her out of the past.

The Immortal blinked at him, "Hmm?" then she shook her head quickly. "I-I'm sorry. I was thinking."

"Are you alright?" he asked her, the careful way he was watching her reminding her once again that for all this man preferred to be underestimated, his eyes really were very, very sharp.

Their waitress's return once more forestalled the need to answer him immediately. "And here we are," she forced her tired smile for both of them as she set their plates down. "Would you like anything else?"

"No," Felicity answered. "Thank you."

After Oliver shook his head, the woman left again, looking like she trying to not look like she
couldn't wait for them to finish eating. They were probably her last table of the day. Neither one of them was really paying attention to their food now though.

"Where'd you go?" Oliver asked her gently, taking a bite of his sandwich. He gestured towards his head when she frowned in response, clarifying after he'd swallowed, "You were thinking about something?"

"Thinking, yes..." The Immortal shook her head. "I don't agree with what she's done. What she's doing. It's hard not to feel a little sympathetic though." She shot him a small smile. "But you already know that. That's why you tried to help her."

"That's what I told myself anyway," Oliver sighed, shaking his head when she tilted her head to the side. "I'd like to think I was that selfless, but I'm not."

"Oliver—"

"I'm not, Felicity." He insisted firmly. "I never have been."

The Immortal snorted, "Never?" she shook her head slowly. "I can't believe that."

"It's true, Felicity. Even now. Especially now. You seem to think I'm some hero—"

"And what's your definition of hero, Oliver?" Felicity demanded firmly, but didn't give him time to respond. "Just last week you saved Mister Merlyn's life. No matter what he's done, what he is or isn't involved in, you did save his life. And the week before that? You saved me."

"I saved Mister Merlyn because he's Tommy's dad, and I pretty much lost my friend in the process." Oliver retorted. "You wouldn't have even been anywhere near the Dodger if—"

"If I hadn't chosen to help take him down? Maybe not," she shrugged, as if coming so close to losing her head hadn't bothered her. It had, of course, it'd been more of shock than any duel she'd fought in centuries—because it had been at least that long since it seemed more like than not that she might lose her head for good. "But you stopped him. You saved me, and you got justice for the Medina family."
"The Medina family," Felicity continued evenly, like it shouldn't come as a surprise to him. (Because, really, it shouldn't.) "Remember? The only time the Dodger killed a man in Madrid? That was Señior Sergio Medina. The Councillor responsible for the police in Madrid released a written statement of gratitude towards the S.C.P.D's 'somewhat unconventional but effective methods' in apprehending him, but the Medina family was a bit more straightforward." She held Oliver's still slightly bewildered gaze for a long moment before admitting with a smirk, "They were all wearing green when Señora Medina thanked the ones responsible for finding justice for her husband in heaven. And just a little while after that her three children were signed up for a summer camp in America—after her eldest had received confirmation by email that the camp did offer archery lessons."

"That's..." Oliver blinked at her slowly. Once. Twice. Then he shook his head. "That's not what I do this for, Felicity. I—"

"I know," she cut him off again, reaching across the table again to place her hand over his, which almost automatically made it relax from the fist it'd been curled into. "But that doesn't mean helping them heal is a bad thing. Does it?"

"...No," he admitted slowly, confusedly torn between his own self-loathing and hesitant pride. "But —"

"And you didn't save Mister Merlyn because he was Tommy's dad," the Immortal corrected him again, gently firm. "You didn't know Tommy or his father would be involved at all when you found out an internationally renowned hitman was flying into Starling City. You chose to stop him before he could harm anyone, without any idea of who he'd been hired to kill. We all chose to find out who he was here for and save them, no matter who they were."

"Yes, you only showed Tommy the truth because he's your friend, and yes he's angry at you right now, but don't confuse the reasons for your actions, Oliver. They're not one and the same."

The vigilante shook his head again, his sharp eyes darting around just a little nervously as he seemed to recall they were in public talking about this. But the tired waitress and cook that were waiting for them to leave so they could close up were the only ones still here with them, and they were eating their own late lunches on the table nearest to the kitchen: too far away to hear the couples softly spoken words. And Elena had locked the door behind the last customer to leave—the old man that'd been reading the newspaper while slowly eating a churros with his own afternoon coffee when they'd come in.

"Remember what you told Detective Lance? That it wasn't about either of you, it was about saving a life?" Felicity only waited for him to give the smallest nod before she pressed, "If choosing to
save someone's life just because it's the right thing to do isn't heroic, I'm not sure what is." She went quiet then, focusing on her food for the first time since it'd been placed in front of her. "Because I refuse to accept that only someone who dies protecting someone else can be called a hero."

Her chicken and chorizo enchilada was quite tasty, the tasty spiciness not at all diminished by the fact that it wasn't steaming hot like it'd been upon arrival. That enchiladas originated in Mexico, rather than Spain, seemed contrary to the accent that tired Elena had been taught, but then again a wise restaurateur should want their menu to contain meals that people would order, and enchiladas had been rather popular in the Americas for a good while now.

"You're right," Oliver finally said, meeting her gaze steadily when she looked across the table at him again.

When he didn't say anything more right away, Felicity had to smirk at him as she replied nonchalantly, "I know."

That made the edges of his mouth quirk upwards in one of his almost-smiles again. "I'm sorry," he sighed.

"Don't be ridiculous—you've been offending yourself a lot more than me," she pointed out, before taking another quick bite of her enchilada because she still had half of hers left and his was already gone.

How did men do that? She couldn't even say she'd noticed him eating quickly or impolitely at any point—in fact he'd been eating at pretty much the same pace as her. So was his mouth just that much bigger than hers or was he just inhaling those big bites instead of really chewing them?

"But, Felicity," he went on as she ate, not seeming to have a single thought about her plate still being half full. "A lot of what I did before you started helping was mostly selfish. Sure, I picked some names from the List based on who was in the news at the time, but a lot of them I only focused on because someone I cared about was somehow tied to them."

'Them' mostly meaning Laurel Lance, Felicity knew, but she didn't need to try to hide any reaction. Really, her exceedingly long history didn't give her much room for judging his lifetime. Felicitas hadn't ever cheated on anyone, but if the most painful part of the betrayal was the breach in expected honesty, and not meeting some expectations and sometimes not being entirely honest were things she'd had to be guilty of far too many times.
"I didn't pay any attention to the city's drug problem until Thea..." Oliver's eyes closed on a painful wince that she couldn't help but share, and she squeezed his hand again, threading her fingers through his on the table top as she took another bite. "I even knew she was in trouble before that." He sighed. "I'd caught her with drugs at my welcome home party—months before her accident, and I did nothing to stop it."

Felicity swallowed before saying softly, "I'm sure that's not true."

"It is true," he insisted painfully. "Almost every time I tried to talk to her ended in an argument I couldn't win. The rest of the time? I just ignored her."

The Immortal snorted, "I'm sure you weren't watching her get drunk and/or high and not stepping in, Oliver. You were busy—with everything. And coming home to find everything changed had to be hard on you." She shook her head. "As for not being able to win arguments with her? You might want to keep in mind that she is a teenager now. And she's been through a lot, too. Losing your dad? Losing you? That couldn't have been easy on her, either." Her eyes darted towards the kitchen as the faint clink of two plates being set together alerted her to the fact that the waitress and cook were clearing their own table, so she quickly took another bite of her lunch, just a little bigger than she was used to.

"Yeah..." Oliver sighed, his eyes also coming back to hers from responding to that faint sound. "But I should've stopped the Count—"

The Immortal nearly choked as she swallowed her food to soon, but managed to force it down so she could interrupt. "You can't be everywhere, Oliver, no one can."

"Yeah, but—"

"But, what?" Felicity cut him off again, struggling just a little to keep her voice even at just barely above her whisper—the cook wasn't in the room anymore, but the waitress was wiping down all the tables, clearly just wasting time with the task while she waited for them to finish up. "Don't try to tell me that Digg was overstating the injuries you had to recover from after you saved the Christmas hostages, I checked your medical file."

"How'd you—"
"Not the point," Felicity didn't let him interrupt. "You said yourself that he almost killed you. Recovering from that took time, physically and mentally. You were in no shape to be taking on that monster, especially since your initial confrontation with him didn't work out so well anyway. I mean, when I saw you the next day I was really being generous when I said you looked like you were hungover."

"I know, but—"

"Unless you're blaming Digg for not taking care of it?" she asked, raising an eyebrow as she interrupted him again. "'Cause that doesn't seem very fair—since you weren't able to go out yourself, even as backup."

"No, of course not..." Oliver sighed, tugging his hand free from her gentle grasp to rub his forehead. "But I should've done something sooner. He was terrorizing the city for months before Thea got jammed up. I should've noticed—"

"How?" Felicity laughed lightly, more for the curious look the tired but surprisingly patient waitress was throwing their way than anything they were talking about. "Were you talking to many dealers or junkies before that?" She shook her head slowly as he only frowned at her. "We'll be able to keep track of more with my computers monitoring all the chatter, but you can still only be in one place at a time. Even if you could go back—would you really choose to not save those hostages if that meant you might've stopped the Count sooner?"

"Of course not," Oliver sighed.

"Just like you wouldn't choose to leave the city's firemen unprotected from their homicidal ex-coworker. Or let those ex-soldiers keep killing the men driving the city's armored cars to steal the money, right?"

Oliver looked visibly torn as he thought about, but he still nodded slowly.

"We all have regrets, Oliver," Felicity told him gently. "But try not to confuse the bad choices you made with the good ones, okay? There's nothing good down that road."

"Okay," her date sighed softly, glancing towards the industrious waitress again, before looking back at her. "I still don't want you anywhere near Helena, Felicity. She already knows too much she can use against me."
The Immortal sighed, "So... what? You don't want to have anything to do with me after this until your ex is gone?"

"That's not—She's not—"

"Because that's not how relationships work, Oliver," Felicity held his gaze again. "That's how they fail." She shook her head. "And I don't like failing. In fact, I'm really not any good at it. Fair warning."

"Duly noted," he chuckled lightly, but didn't say anything as their waitress finally headed their way.

"How are you guys doing?" Elena asked them with the best smile she could muster. "Would you like anything wrapped to go?"

"I'm all set," Oliver replied. "Felicity?"

The Immortal glanced down at her plate, which was respectfully cleared, then shook her head as she looked at the petite woman again. "No, thank you. I would love some more coffee to go though, if that's alright."

"Of course," Elena agreed warmly. "I'll just put a fresh pot on."

"That sounds good, actually, I'll take one, too," Oliver said as he pulled a hundred dollar bill from his wallet and held it out to her. "Keep the change."

The waitress's smile widened only a little bit more as she bowed her head with the same careful professionalism that'd governed her patience with them. "Thank you, Mister Queen." She said as she accepted the money. "I'll have those coffees right out." After both of them thanked her, she hurried back towards the kitchen.

"You do know you just massively over-tipped her, right?" Felicity asked, somewhat amused by how easily the man gave away money. While she'd never really wanted for anything herself, she had learned over time to at least try and be financially circumspect—mostly at Methos' insistence.
Overspending drew attention, and more often than not it was more attention than any Immortal should want regularly. It was a careful balance, to fit in where you were supposed to. By that standard, dating Oliver Queen was decidedly outside of the realm of possibilities she'd picked for this lifetime: but that wasn't something she'd give up if she had the choice.

"She stayed open a lot longer than she should have for us," the billionaire shrugged, clearly not caring about the money. Though it was as much out of compassion for the hardworking waitress as it was for the convenience of her not rushing them, as well as meeting the expectations of being a recognizable, famously wealthy figure in the city. "Felicity—"

"I'll be careful. I won't take any unnecessary risks, alright?" she promised him. "But I'm not going to hide, and I'm not going to pretend we're not dating. Unless you are breaking up with me?"

"No!" the response flew from the archer's mouth almost before she'd finished asking the question, and this time he was the one to reach across the table to thread their fingers again. "No, I'm not... I just want you safe."

"I'm a lot tougher than I look," the Immortal told him again, before immediately repeating her promise. "But I will be careful." Then she glanced at her watch, tilting her head to the side to read it at the awkward angle. "I really should get back to work though."

"Our coffee's not here yet," Oliver reminded her, gently squeezing her hand as if to hold her prisoner a few moments more.

"Right," Felicity chuckled.

She didn't particularly like to be one of the last ones to report back from lunch break—despite her having been the very last one to leave, Stevenson would still complain. And any time he spent away from his television—trying to pretend he knew what someone in his profession was supposed to be doing for their paycheck—was time wasted in the I.T department. But if she was going to have to put up with that moron all afternoon anyway, she might as well try to enjoy what was left of her lunch break.

"So," she cocked her head to the side. "Where are we going for dinner?"

That was where they were going next, after all—dinner before the swords came out. And the dinner part was easier to talk about, since she still wasn't sure how she should act when Oliver and
Digg both tried to teach her how to defend herself: with or without a sword...

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Well, there's that scene. Sorry again for the wait, guys, I really don't mean to take so long between updates... The new story I've started is only partially to blame: I don't know how many of you might've already read it or not, but I've started posting an Arrow/Jurassic Park & Jurassic World crossover that I'd been thinking about for a while. If you haven't seen it yet and it sounds interesting to you, please take a look, so far it's been a lot of fun for me... though it'll probably get pretty crazy not too far down the road. That's only partially the problem though. The real issue I had with this scene, I think, is that they were on a date/eating again. The conversation had to happen, and I didn't like it taking place over the phone or in her office so they went out to lunch, but I became bored with it fairly quickly. So you're probably not going to see they're next dinner date: skipping to the sword stuff seems a lot safer more my sanity (miniscule though that may be). So, of course, I've set myself up for the next scene I'm writing for the other crossover to take place over dinner. >_
Practice

Chapter Notes

*sigh* You know, I really never mean for updating to take this long... Sorry. :( More notes at the end. For now, enjoy the too long awaited scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity knew why she'd let herself be talked into this. Her new boyfriend would probably only get more protective as time went on if she let him get away with it. And without proving to him that she could defend herself, at least a little, she couldn't very well make any sort of argument about it that he'd accept. Putting it off wouldn't help. The problem with revealing anything at all, though, was simply how much—or how little—she should reveal...

She obviously didn't need self-defense training of any kind. Not really. Regular practice was a must for anyone who didn't want to let their edge dull, as it were, but any lessons she'd taken in longer than the last thousand years had been about learning a new move or style, nothing more or less. And, well, outside of The bedamned Game, she didn't have to worry most of the time. So long as her head stayed attached to her shoulders via her neck, she'd recover from anything, and these days guns were the weapons of choice, followed by knives. Not swords.

Nowadays swords were a rarity, and even mortals who wielded larger bladed weapons weren't likely to attempt beheading before stabbing. Granted, mortal swordsmen weren't entirely unheard of even these days: the League of Assassins being a major example. A potential problem if someone managed to overthrow Mazin for that horrible title he'd chosen for his position as "The Head of the Demon." But even if that happened and his "successor" started sending out assassins after known Immortals, the odds would most likely still be in her favor most of the time. That was only assuming someone, somehow was able to defeat Mazin, which was so unlikely only Methos might waste time contemplating it. Mazin, of course wouldn't send anyone after her—or any Immortal, unless he was hunting them personally. He didn't believe in the Game any more than she did, he just had his own code of honor that sometimes came into play around other Immortals who were stupid enough to cross him. So, as long as she avoided the Middle East and anyone that might be a terrorist linked to that area, she should be safe.

None of that was 'obvious' to Oliver and Diggle though. And Felicity couldn't tell them. Not unless she wanted to try telling them everything. Something she simply wasn't ready for. Time wouldn't help her in that regard: not when the last lover she'd told the truth to had turned on her so inhumanely.
It didn't really matter that Methos was likely right. That while Felicidad (as she'd been known then) had been inclined to believe herself in love with José, she was more in love with the idea of marrying for love. Meanwhile the Spaniard was in love with wealth and influence she could bring to the match in that lifetime...

In the almost two centuries since that terrible death, Felicitas had told a few mortals the truth. Donna, as the girl she'd raised from the role of goddaughter to the portrayal of actual daughter, sister, and eventually her current identity's mother, was of course the most recent. The vibrant, lively girl that'd lost her father to the Game hadn't taken the revelation exactly well, but what she had been afraid of was losing the only family she had left. She hadn't been afraid of Felicitas, and she never would be.

Anymore than Oliver or Digg would probably be...

Somehow, however, Felicity still couldn't shake that vice grip holding her heart hostage at the thought of revealing her secret again now....

It wasn't because she expected Oliver Queen's reaction to be anything like the man she'd meant to marry in Spain during the aptly named Ominous Decade... No. Her mistake in Spain hadn't made her doubt herself that much, it's only made her more cautious. Much more cautious.

Felicitas had read the character of enough men to form a fairly educated guess on how exactly Oliver, and Diggle too, would react to the idea of Immortals. To her being an Immortal. Her hero and their friend wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't ever try to. Yes, the idea might boggle their minds. Neither of them would react well at all to however she might choose to physically prove she was telling the truth and spinning some strange tale, a bad joke, or losing her mind. And she was quite certain both the former soldier and her archer would despise The Game in theory alone, never mind when they first found out she'd accepted a challenge from another Immortal at some point in the future...

The many protective men Felicitas had known, as friends, teachers and sometimes lovers had never liked the idea of her fighting. Let alone dying. Every one of them would've sooner risked their own neck than hers, just like Oliver—and probably Diggle, too—would, and it'd sometimes taken a lot of time and a lot of arguing to make them see that they couldn't fight her battles for her. That she couldn't bear to watch them go off to a fight they might not win—a fight that she most often knew she would win—and simply sit there wondering if she'd ever see their much loved smile again. If she'd ever hear them laugh or... do anything. If they'd still be alive the next day...

Felicitas had decided long ago that she'd sooner risk her own head in any fight than let another
loved one die for her ever again. Win or lose: by fate's whims or sheer skill, she could accept either outcome so long as it was only her life on the line.

Perhaps it was somewhat selfish of her. Most of the friends and lovers she'd argued the matter with certainly seemed to think so... but she'd suffered enough loss, more than enough sacrifice, in her first lifetime to last her all eternity. Watching her mother burn from her would undoubtedly always haunt her nights, just like those last memories she had of Eligius, Izeb' and Didas... when only Anaruz had escaped Cassandra's merciless vengeance and she still had to leave him, too...

Felicity flinched, quickly shaking the memories of that long gone, dark day away.

Telling Oliver about Immortality wasn't something she could do yet if she didn't have to, and she'd yet to see any reason to necessitate it. Yet.

Once she did... well, she wasn't sure how much it'd actually help her with his protectiveness. Oliver was stubborn, so Felicity was sure nothing less than the complete truth would dissuade him. And even that might not convince him.

All the same, Methos wasn't the only one to train her in the millennia past. More than a few mortals had made their marks, too.

Some of them never knew the truth about her. Immortality was such an immense, overwhelming thing after all. Even in ancient times, when the world believed in gods who walked among them, it astounded. Today—or even in the last several centuries—mankind had become more skeptical.

And Oliver Queen was probably a skeptic before the Island, despite his carefree reputation. Lian Yu—Mandarin for Purgatory. An apt name according to the scars on Oliver's body and psyche.

"Ready?" Oliver asked her as he landed in front of her, having dropped down from the salmon ladder he'd just completed her now favorite exercise-for-viewing on.

'Not really,' Felicity thought, but of course didn't say. She still wasn't sure of which way she should play her skills here and now, let alone later. A natural affinity from childhood left a little too long to rust, or a hobby only occasionally revisited with some contrived clumsiness thrown in? One ran the real risk of raising suspicions that she was hiding far more than any mortal could imagine—which she was, of course. But the other may be beyond her none-too-shabby acting skills. Those thoughts had Felicity frowning as she answered with a headshake, "I thought Digg was going to be
"He will," Oliver assured her, not looking like the question bothered him at all, though after only a second's thought she'd realized it very well could. "But he doesn't know much about swords."

"The pointy end goes into the other guy, right?" the former soldier threw out with a teasing grin that was probably meant to be reassuring.

Except it was exactly what the Immortal had expected of the two men, and thus why she'd bothered to clarify when she agreed that she wanted Digg to train her. She hadn't phrased it like that, specifically: she'd seized onto the fact that the former soldier was the one pressuring her to start with and acted like Oliver hadn't even offered when he'd put his own opinion about the issue forward.

Neither Oliver nor Digg professed any particular partiality to the sword, but after watching them spar with sticks, Felicity didn't doubt that Oliver had at least some training. While she'd watched them spar she'd seem Oliver incorporate a few too many maneuvers that anyone who knew how to wield a sword should recognize. Perhaps he was taught to stick-fight by a swordsman? That begged the question of where he'd run into one in the last five years, but wasn't relevant now. Ultimately, she'd wanted Digg to be her teacher because him being a novice with a blade or completely ignorant of it could work in her favor in so far as she wished to continue hiding her
skills. At the back of her mind, she'd always have the knowledge that he didn't know the weapon well and that awareness should help her hold herself back a bit more than her conflicted wishes not reveal too much...

Even if his actual sword training was only very minimal, just barely enough to impact how he wielded other weapons, the movements were something Oliver's body and eyes knew well. Digg did, too, of course, but Oliver was the one that was more likely to recognize the fact that her body did in fact know what it was doing when she had a sword in her hands. Because after millennia of wielding the weapon in practice, in sparring, and in combat—far too many duels and too many wars, too—Felicitas wasn't entirely certain she could feign the clumsy uncertainty of a novice...

"That was a joke, Felicity," Diggle spoke up, frowning just a little at her—clearly concerned for her. After a moment, though, he undoubtedly rationalized that she was just nervous for what'd be the obvious reason if she had little experience in combat. She was about to start sparring with their vigilante team leader, after all, and if she wasn't both a lot more experienced than him and considerably more durable the idea alone would probably intimidate even knowing he wouldn't want to actually hurt her.

"Ready?" Oliver asked again.

"As I'll ever be," Felicity agreed with a sigh, still not sure she wanted to play this as she glanced between him and Digg, who was meandering over from the training dummy he'd been beating.

"So where did you start learning about swords?" the former soldier asked her. "In high school? Fencing or something like that?"

Felicity almost shrugged noncommittally, not wanting to talk about her past, because she really couldn't. Her cover story was fool-proof online and on paper, but her babbling tongue could make more than a few holes in it all on its own. It already had—though fortunately Oliver had let his discovery of her 'brother' go with surprising ease so far. "It wasn't in school, no," she replied carefully, spurred on by the looks uncertain speculation the two men were trying to subtly exchange. "It was, well... have either of you ever heard of the S.C.A? The Society of Creative Anachronism?"

It was a cover she'd used a few times in the past, since the society's conception. After all, a relatively large and widespread community where it was commonplace for someone to carry swords and answer to assumed names was an opportunity any Immortal would be a fool to pass up even if curiosity or nostalgia alone didn't draw them to explore it. Outside of that 'world,' however, most of the mortals who played in it weren't master swordsmen who had to worry about other swordsmen trying to cut off their heads from time to time, so it was still a relatively safe place to hide in general. Sort of a step back before the time when explosions started to become
commonplace on battlefields and thereby made an Immortal's supposed safety there not so certain even. It was easier when weapons weren't actually strong or sharp enough to cut through someone's neck with ease. Because when one was fighting mortal swordsmen with swords that couldn't decapitate so quickly, it was unwise for those mortals to waste time trying to chop an opponent's head off in the heat of battle. So even if they got lucky and stabbed you, they were more likely to assume you'd die from the fatal injury and move on, not realizing you'd get back up again sometime later. How long later, of course, depended upon the raw power of the Immortal's Quickening—augmented by age or other Immortals' final deaths—and any adrenaline that might be fueling it at the time. When one ran into another Immortal on the battlefield, of course, that safety was nonexistent. With their Quickening backing up their blows, an Immortal could behead their enemy with the right strike... which wasn't at all what the ancient should be thinking about right now, as both men blinked at her.

Diggle looked thoughtful a moment later. "Don't they dress up like knights or something like that?"

"That's right," the Immortal nodded, not even trying to keep her lips from quirking a little in her honest amusement at the idea in general—never mind how useless the armor they typically wore would be if someone came at them with a real sword. "Knights and ladies, lady-knights, kings, queens, tournaments, mock-battles... The Middle Ages 'as they ought to have been,' supposedly," she finished with a light shrug.

"What, like those fairs you're supposed to dress up for?" Oliver blinked again, shrugging when they both looked at him. "Thea used to like the one that opened in Castlefall in October."

"They still do," Digg told him. "Every year. A.J wanted to go last year."

"Armor and all?" Felicity asked curiously, not sure she could see the former soldier willing strapping on fake armor, but she also couldn't imagine him renting or buying real armor to make a more realistic statement.

"Nah, he thought that was 'silly,'" Digg smirked approvingly. As though what was now approval hadn't just been relief at the time—she could honestly picture John Diggle having fun with his nephew, both of them decked up in the modern make-belief equivalent of a knight's armor, but it was both an expense and a hassle that one could dodge with some relief if there wasn't a real drive to actually do it.

Though now she kind of wanted to make both men try on the shining armor that neither one of them probably thought suited them, but then again no real knight's armor had actually shown when it was worn for real warfare. And both of the men in front of her were more heroes in truth than most of those so-called 'valiant' knights ever were.
The Immortal smiled softly, but forced herself to go on. "The Renaissance Fairs are similar in some ways," she acknowledged, though it had been a number of years since she'd attended either one, and she hadn't been take either all that seriously. "But the S.C.A's more organized. You can train and compete to actually move up in the society: all for fun, of course..."

And really not very much like the timeframes they wished to commemorate at all. The idealized ages had very little to do with the ideals of fair play and chivalry that modern mortals would like to cling to: it's inclusiveness of all alone went against the very basic nature of the time periods. Equality as a real and practiced standard was a still very new thing. True, democracy could trace its routes back to ancient Greece, but even in Athens equality was only among all Athenian men. Not women. Not men who weren't citizens of the city-state by birth. And it as more unusual for a freeman *not* to own slaves back then than the reverse.

"So, what?" the vigilante asked then, looking torn between bemusement and bewilderment. "They handed you a sword and green shirt and then told you to attack the guys in red, like capture the flag or something?"

"Hardly," Felicity snorted, shaking her head again. "That wouldn't exactly be safe, would it?" she asked rhetorically, continuing without waiting for even another blink. "A certain amount of safety gear's required, of course. And the weapons aren't entirely real. Even the metal blades have pads on the tips and blunt edges... Safety first."

'Safety.' Saying that in relation to swords seemed strange. Undoubtedly it always would. Almost as strange as the term 'swordplay.' Laughable, even.

In times not all that long past, safety meant making sure the threat was no longer a threat. And the accepted way one did that would these days be called murder outside of war zones: ideally accepted as self-defense most of the time—as it should be if that's what it was. Even in war zones, though, one could sometimes be charged with murder or manslaughter just for defending themselves or their loved ones. But the act of drawing one's sword and not intending harm, or even just being surprised by anyone being hurt while sparring with naked blades, boggled the mind a bit.

"Uh-huh," Oliver mustered in answer, and she could almost see his uncertain expectation regarding her potential skill diminishing—it was almost as plain to see in his eyes as the lingering images of children playing dress-up and hitting each other with toy swords were in her own mind, even though some memories of children actually fighting danced through there, too.

Considering all of the scars on the archer's skin, covering him nearly from head to toe, his opinion
of 'play' in relation to weaponry might actually be similar to her own. Then again, Digg had seen war, too, so playing with weapons, rather than fighting or training with them, likely held some lack of appeal to him, too. No matter how much their enjoyment in sparring occasionally looked a little childlike, carefree in the general expectation that they could trust the friend they were trading blows with not to aim for a real injury or worse. Neither of her boys were children, of course—they certainly didn't look like it—but from time to time their training took on a somewhat playful air: as it did for anyone who spent a significant amount of time perfecting their technique with the help of someone trustworthy. But jokes, laughs and infrequent smiles aside, they were always seriously training, which didn't make it easier to stomach the idea of either of their opinions of her probably skills shrinking...

"It's not just mock-battles, though," the Immortal went on quickly. "The really skilled are in tournaments and fencing bouts, but they're the instructors for a lot of classes, too..." she allowed another small shrug. "It's more realistic than modern fencing, I think."

Which was why Felicity had specifically decided on this explanation, even though she couldn't quite craft every sentence to be entirely true, it was the closest she could get without needing to actually tell the truth her tongue wasn't ready to tell. And she had been to some S.C.A events in the past, though unlike some of her friends she'd never officially joined or attempted to advance in the simulated society. It wasn't like she didn't know enough about the modern idealized version of 'history' as it hadn't really happened. If need be she could feign ignorance, or the offended non-ignorance that was typical of mortals that hadn't lived it but believed they knew everything about the past. Such conversations could occasionally be quite comical.

The Society of Creative Anachronism, commonly called the S.C.A, was an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts, skills, and traditions of pre-seventeenth century Europe. And, to some extent, elsewhere as well. It was not about history, even less so than many history books were. It wasn't about violence or death. It was about holding onto the imagined ideals of the times that none of the mortals could remember, so they clung to tales past down by tongue and text and let their imagination take flight.

Felicity had never stayed long amongst any of the fantasy groups, always needing to be mindful of the time period in between her forays into creative reconstruction. Still, it wasn't unpleasant to pass the time in settings that were similar enough to some those ages gone to kindle fond memories, but only rarely quite close enough to inspire more unpleasant memories. She knew more than a few fellow Immortals that liked to use such affairs for just that purpose, and had known more.

The last time she saw Rebecca alive, in fact, had been at just such an event at the Shire of Thamesreach, the group most local to London. Felicity and Donna had met Rebecca there with her husband, John Bower. Amanda and her mortal friend, Lucy, had joined them for their third day there. As far as Felicity knew, that'd been the last adventure Amanda had had with her teacher, too, so she was glad she could be sure it was well worth remembering on its own, no matter how exasperated she'd been with that knight that'd been attempting to court her throughout that whole week they spent enjoying that popular Shire in the S.C.A Kingdom of Drachenwald.
Barely a month later Felicitas was flying to France after Rebecca's funeral. Donna had been in tears because of the friend they'd lost and upset that they'd missed the funeral. Those kind of tears were sometimes beyond Felicitas, though: especially when it came to the damn Game. Sometimes she was just too tired of it all to cry, though those unshed tears didn't make the loss hurt any less. She'd been irritated at not being able to attend the funeral itself, though. John had invited her, of course. She was his second call after Amanda. But Amanda's invitation of the younger Highlander had been a calculated move.

Methos hadn't met the young Scotsman yet, not back then, but his position in the Watchers meant they were aware of Duncan MacLeod's ties to the Witch. They'd never found out exactly how the Watchers had learned of the prophecy regarding the young Immortal that'd "challenge the voice of death" and thus save Cassandra from the only student she ever taught the skill she was most infamous for these days. But the younger Highlander was proven to be her chosen one when he stumbled upon her hut in the Donan Woods in his youth. That was a connection Felicity, perhaps unfairly, wasn't inclined to forgive easily. Macleod's defense of Amanda and victory over Rebecca's killer likely had a lot to do with why Methos allowed the Scotsman to find him almost a year after that. When Luthor was still alive, however, Amanda had used the Highlander's presence for more than just the comfort of a friend and sometimes lover. The Immortal thief knew Felicitas' wariness of the anyone who'd associated with Cassandra at all would make her at least hesitate before interfering, and it'd worked.

Felicitas would've liked to be at the funeral, for John and Amanda both. But she was also irritated then because she knew that Amanda's decision to tell MacLeod of Rebecca's murder had been a calculated one. She wanted to be the one to avenge her teacher by taking Luthor's head, and she could be much more sure of her ability to control a chivalrous swordsman who'd only been around a few hundred years than she could ever hope to control Felicitas. Or Methos. It was absurdly foolish, and it'd nearly cost Amanda her head—if not for the Highlander's timely intervention. So flying to France after all that'd died down had grated, but what else could she do?

Even after Methos had been surprised to find a man that might make a good friend in Amanda's sometimes lover, Felicity hadn't wanted to meet Connor MacLeod's kinsman. And her wariness of him had been proven right as soon as Cassandra wandered into the Highlander's modern life. He'd defended her against Kantos—which Felicity could actually forgive. But not long after that he'd turned on Methos, as though their friendship hadn't merited the slightest defense. Felicitas knew that that betrayal had hurt her brother, she would've been able to see that even if she hadn't already known the world's oldest Immortal had come to see the Highlander as a true friend: one he would've defended with his life. One he had risked his neck for more than once before that. One he had gone out of his way to save several times...

So Felicitas was glad she hadn't made the mistake of meeting the Highlander back then. It didn't matter that Methos had forgiven Duncan MacLeod in the slightest. Her brother would always accept the blame of the Witch's every misdeed as his own, due to his guilt towards his own ancient crimes against her. As though those crimes weren't the way most of the world worked back then. As though the murders and all out wars the Witch had planned and carried out—for her vengeance
or sometimes just to further her own ends—were tied to the woman's First Death and early Immortality in any way other than the Witch herself. As though his decision to change after that, to bring down the so-called brother's he'd felt mostly safe with and start anew, to try to better both himself and the world—successfully for thousands of years thereafter—meant nothing.

The world was not simple. Not entirely. It never really had been. There were usually more reasons for why someone did something wrong than when they did something right. Doing right didn't need to be explained, after all, but wrongs could sometimes be justified. Excused by circumstances, or sometimes just compassion. But mercy wasn't something the Witch would ever understand...

Those were the shades of gray between all the black and white. Another massive piece of reality that was missing from many history books, as well as the historical reenactments and the viewpoints of people like Duncan MacLeod and Cassandra.

It was the sort of thing that Amanda was easily able to forgive. Like Methos, she saw herself more selfish than not and therefore more bad than good. So she could forgive her sometimes lover his strict ethics as long as he was willing to bend a bit for her. And maybe she'd figured she was helping him grow up a little along the way, too.

It'd be hard to tell. Short of forcing Duncan to chose between Amanda and Cassandra... One lover or another. A woman that would sooner spit on a mugger than give them an inch or a supposed lady that had no trouble laughing with mass murderers. The careful thief that oft got in over head but would do so for a friend without a second's thought, or the merciless manipulator that would set a city on fire to save herself from the start of a duel she might not win. Perhaps if Duncan MacLeod made the correct choice there, then Felicitas would be willing to meet him.

Regardless, she couldn't find any real regret in herself for not having received Duncan MacLeod's vaunted friendship back then. Mistakes could be made, and those she could forgive, but betrayal wasn't a mistake. It was a decision. A wrong decision. And when that wrong decision hurt someone she loved, Felicitas didn't have any trouble admitted she could hold a grudge.

Better to have her memories of Rebecca as unspoiled as they could be.

Yes, losing Rebecca added a shade of sadness to her memories of that foray into Thamesreach. Just like the deaths of everyone else would. But Amanda was the only other Immortal there that week, so such sadness wasn't surprising.

Lucy was dead now, too. From Kahler's disease, or multiple myeloma as it was better known. She wasn't sure why the eponym that honored the Austrian physician wasn't universal—usually the
discoverer was thus honored and it had at least something to do with why so many mortals worked so hard to make such discoveries. So that they might be remembered: immortalized in a way that they physically couldn't be. To Felicitas, who'd known a number of mortals who's real fear of death was more linked to the idea of not being remember and being gone than death itself by the time it came, not honoring the good doctor thus seemed unjust. All the same, it was the disease that Doctor Otto Kahler was best known for that eventually claimed the lovely actress's life despite the fortune her friends were willing to throw at it so that she might make seventy. Lucy, herself, had seemed more content with the idea of dying, pleased to finally be joining her Marco after living a long, eventful life her murdered Immortal husband could be content with. Even if she had only made it to 69. A respectable age historically, but with modern medicine it still had been something of a shock—then again, losing a loved one, or anyone, always was to some extent.

Rebecca's widower was still around. John Bower hadn't been happy to outlive his Immortal wife when The Game stole her away from him, anymore than Lucy had when her husband's head was taken. But he, too, had lived a long and fruitful life... though from the sounds of her last few email correspondence with him, she might have to attend another funeral all too soon...

"Felicity?" Oliver's concerned voice brought her out of her thoughts, and she had to wince when she saw that same concern clear on his face and Digg's.

How long had she been lost in thought? Again?

"Sorry," the Immortal said quickly, shaking her head. "Mind wandered off for a minute there." She blinked at him as innocently as she could manage with the idea of dead and maybe soon-to-be dead mortal friends in her head. "What were we talking about? The S.C.A, right?"

"Specifically how you learned to fence there," Digg interjected.

Felicity immediately shook her head again. "Not fence," she corrected mildly, going on quickly. "Not in the way you're thinking, if you're picturing me in all white padding with a weird helmet. Well, weirder helmet, I suppose, but I've always thought the modern epee masks look strange. And not very historical." She shook her head, hurrying on before they could decide on anything to ask to that. "Like I told you," she nodded to Oliver, "I didn't compete, but I did train for some of the mock-battles. And no, they didn't just hand out weapons and team jerseys for that."

Actually the real distinction in her mind was that fencing was a sport. A competition where you used flimsy blades and struck for points with no intention of harming your opponent anymore than they usually wished to harm you.
In a real sword fight, the intentions couldn't be more opposed. The warriors that once fought for the diversion of the masses were more similar to real combat, of course. Though how such 'entertainment'—as Rome had aggrandized it—had become the gentlemanly duels of honor that'd covered for the Game over the last few centuries, she really couldn't imagine. Never mind how duels to the death became hitting each other with sticks for points.

"Safety first," Diggle recalled the catch phrase from earlier, though he looked just as skeptical of the idea as Oliver did. Neither of them were even trying to hide it. Well, at least that told her they'd never been to any of the bigger S.C.A events, or at least hadn't participated in any of the quote-unquote-combat. Whether or not that helped her here was anyone's guess... though their concern for how much her mind was wondering today might be even more helpful, no matter how much it surprised her.

"Right," Felicity shrugged. "The marshals in the S.C.A—they sort of act like referees. But not for judgment, per say. Their job is to keep everything as safe as possible."

And if that sounded absurd in her head, it was even worse out loud. That was how Rebecca had explained it all though, to John that last time they were all together, and to Felicitas the first time she'd managed to convince the other ancient that they should attend one of the early S.C.A events for nostalgia's sake. Felicitas had barely been listening with half an ear each time, but she remembered enough for a few Google searches to make it fairly fresh in her mind.

"And they let you fight?" Oliver asked her with a frown. "Isn't that when chivalry's supposed to be from?"

That frown on his face irked her because she knew it had more to do with the idea of her fighting in general than play-fighting. But that was what was supposed be fixed a little here.

Still, Felicity had to force a shrug, "I'm not exactly sure when chivalry was popularly tied to romance, but it was really more about religion." Her second shrug came easier. "The S.C.A's all about protection, but not between genders. There's no gender barriers in the S.C.A. Armor and swords and sheaths—and not at all what I was actually talking about," she winced when her mind (more specifically the gutter that'd taken up residence in it) caught up with what she was saying on cue with Oliver and Digg's not so well hidden amusement.

"I'm with Oliver there though," Digg spoke up, not even trying to lose his grin. "Thought chivalry was about protecting your lady."

"It is—or was. Sort of," Felicity sighed, hurrying to respond in the hope that it might chase the
blush back out of her face at some point tonight. "But it was first and foremost a code of conduct," she shrugged again. "It started off with the cavalries. That's what knights really were, you know: the men that could afford horses and armor. The armor got heavier as time went on, for those that could afford it, usually by accident of birth." Not sure this was really something she wanted to debate with them either, especially given what she'd seen of Oliver's own belief in self-worth, which was abominably low, especially considering all he was trying to do for his city. He was slowly but surely fighting to become like the champions of old, exceedingly few and rare though the real ones were. So she tried to summarize it more, "The nobility owed their loyalty to their sovereign first and foremost, but as the influence of the church grew it's debatable which they were supposed to value more. Both came before their family though, and long before any love interest." She was a little out of breath by the time she babbled to that finish, but she knew there was still more she had to say.

Oliver and Diggle both looked a little conflicted by what she'd said already—probably for varying reasons each their own—but she didn't wait to see what they might say in response. Admittedly, she knew that she was over simplifying, extremely so, but they were talking about etiquette as it applied to a societies, and specifically how that fit to every individual in that society was as complicated back then as it was now. And if they kept talking about what'd been and what hadn't (or not really talking about one or the other), they'd be here all night without ever managing to get around to the swords actually coming out. As tempting as that process was, she'd already decided that trying to beg off or postpone this would be more trouble, and cause more problems, than it was worth.

So she hurried on, "In the S.C.A, lots of women dress up like men for the actual battles, too, but
some don't. Early on some women may've had two separate S.C.A identities, I think. A male one for combat, so it wasn't an issue for debate, and a lady off the field. Not sure when that became less popular than just tying your identity to a medieval culture where women did fight, cause there more than a few of those. It was probably pretty quickly though: getting into a gown with a corset was torturous enough without having to change out of armor first... though I could see wanting to get into the armor instead of the gown. Why anyone would want to hold onto those things I don't understand, anymore than why they were created in the first place. I mean, the name's a derivative from the same Latin word as corpse for a reason: you probably get about as much air when you're wearing a real one."

"Why'd you wear it then?" Digg asked. "When you could've just stuck to one of the cultures where women could fight? Doubt they were wearing corsets."

"I prefer to be authentic," Felicity sighed, honestly wishing she could look back on her own past and not remembering needing to fight with a corset tied tight to the standard's of the time. When she saw Oliver was frowning, too, and tried to reassure them again. "But I'm exaggerating. A little." When that attempt at reassurance didn't seem to help much either, the Immortal shook her head again. "There's not really any specific loyalty to any nation for the attire: it just has to be from between the fifteens to seventeenth centuries, I think, and it has to offer enough protection." Felicity paused, then added thoughtfully, "Which is probably why you don't see any Amazons at those things, even when Xena was going strong."

Anyone trying to model themselves after the costumes on that show wouldn't have been all that authentic to true Amazons, of course, especially if they were modeling themselves after the actresses wearing next to nothing rather than the few that were in what at least looked like actual armor.

But accuracy and realism weren't major selling points of the S.C.A from what she'd seen, so it still could've become pretty popular if not for the all-embracing safety standards that'd likely always amuse and mystify her just because of how parallel they were to what one commonly saw historically... Then again, this was the twenty-first century, not the sixteenth, and safety should've been important all along.

"So you were wearing a big suit of armor then?" Digg asked, looking skeptical again.

Oliver did, too. Both of them visibly doubtful of how much armor her small form could bear.

This, at least, didn't offend her because the heavy plate armor they were talking about never had been of any use to her. Her strengths were her size and speed, and big bulky armor wasn't at all good for either one. Which might have just as much to do with her age as her size, since she was an Amazon of ancient times, but she had to agree that the idea of her ever trying to build up her
strength to the point where plate armor might be useful to her was entirely insane.

"No," Felicity shot that down with a small laugh. "Leathers are all right, too." She nodded to Oliver. "Your outfit would probably be accepted, but they'd make you wear a mask. After telling you that you couldn't call yourself Robin Hood and advising against The Hood, too."

Oliver only rolled his eyes, but the edges of his mouth were turning up a little again as he asked, "So you said you'd bring the swords you were comfortable with?"

Yet another conundrum she'd had to fret over before tonight. While some of the swords around her house were hidden, not all of them were. Her new love interest would've had to be blind to miss the ones that were displayed like decorations—hidden in plain sight, but not at all the kind of thing he'd miss—so she was sure he'd made note of them. And that that was why he'd agreed to her bringing the swords without argument. Still, accidents could happen all too easily with real swords if you weren't vigilant, and she didn't know for certain that her vigilante knew how to handle one. That being the case, it hadn't been that hard to convince herself to follow the S.C.A's lead on this.

"I hope you're not disappointed," Felicity answered as she gestured to the box she'd carried in while the two men were still sparring. Though the archer had started jumping up his ladder before she'd walked into sight to see him up there and Diggle slamming a few hits into one of the dummies, it hadn't disguised what she'd heard when she'd first walked in. The sharp clacks of the eskrima sticks intermixed with the occasional grunt and thud a clear indicator of exactly what they were doing while they waited for her to arrive after she'd told Oliver to go on ahead from Big Belly Burger and that she'd meet them over here after she'd changed clothes. Not that the relatively short amount of time that'd bought her had been good for much of anything other than more doubts she didn't really need to think about. And she hadn't been offended. It was wise of Oliver to work through any aggressive anxieties he might have himself tonight with Digg if he was worried about hurting her. Just like it was a good idea for Digg to be here, too. Actually, she could've watched them go at it for a while longer without being too unhappy—her nerves about what was to come notwithstanding. The shared sweaty shirtlessness was too nice a sight for her not to watch and might've taken her mind off her worries at least a little bit...

Instead of saying anything, Oliver moved to open the box, and then he studied the three swords inside it with clear curiosity that didn't fade as he realize they weren't sheathed swords. The blades weren't metal, they were rattan. The durable palm wood that was once the common source for canes used in corporal punishment was still a popular material for creating weapons today. Bastons, staves and swords. They were still wood, not metal, but far less likely to splinter than almost any other wood, and thus safer than true blades could ever be.

She could've chosen the lightweight rapiers the S.C.A allowed for fencing—with blunted tips and unsharpened edges—but these felt a little safer and a little bit more sincere. Their resemblance to historical blades was only in their size and somewhat in their weight, but at least they looked like a
blade you'd be able to decapitate with, which all of the swords she'd chosen to study had to be. A minor, silent admission, perhaps, but one nonetheless.

When she saw some of that tension she'd only been partially aware of in the back of her mind leave Oliver's brow and Digg's shoulders, she was glad she'd chosen thus. The wooden, weighted swords might not be at all what either of the men were expecting, and they probably looked like toys to the former soldier and the vigilante. Both were reassured by the sight of those toys. As though the baby step towards her wielding a weapon around them had been hard to take—even when they were the ones cajoling for it in the first place—and thus these weapons that weren't really weapons were a welcome sight.

Not that they couldn't be weapons, of course, with a little effort. But that wasn't what the relieved men were thinking about.

"Wood and duct tape?" Oliver questioned, a small smile tugging at his mouth once more.

"It's rattan... like your eskrima sticks?" Felicity clarified waiting for his nod of confirmation before continuing. "Big broadswords and longswords, any swords, really, are dangerous even when they're not sharpened. They don't even allow the rattan swords into the field at the S.C.A if they aren't wrapped properly and flexible enough. The hilts are real, though, that's where a lot of the weight's from. I thought—"

"They're perfect," Oliver cut in smoothly, his smile a little warmer than it needed to be as he reassured her. "You're right, it's safer if we start out with these."

"You brought three," Diggle noted with a wry grin. "One for me?"

Felicity shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Didn't want to keep you from having fun, too, Digg."

"Oh no, we wouldn't want that," the big man chuckled, then added dryly. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she replied with saccharine smile.

"So you are ready?" Oliver clarified again as he walked towards the mats with two of the wooden swords in his hands, holding one of them out to her hilt first in invitation.
"As I'll ever be," the Immortal agreed with a sigh, forcing herself to close the distance to him and accept the offered 'sword' while Oliver gave her a more thorough once-over than he had earlier. Undoubtedly checking to be sure that her workout attire she'd changed into at home had been better than the clothing she'd worn to her date. She could fight in anything, of course, even those damn corsets and hoopskirts that couldn't go out of style fast enough in her mind—back when they were worn to strangle the waist into more of an hourglass shape than was natural for any woman. But sneakers and the slightly padded clothing she'd changed into was much better suited to swordplay than the skirt and heels she'd been wearing earlier.

"So who taught you?" Diggle asked curiously. "Some tournament champion near Vegas?"

Felicity almost shrugged noncommittally, not wanting to talk about her past, because she really couldn't. The more she said, the easier it'd be to slip up at some point later on, especially if she had to drift farther and farther from the truth. Her cover story was fool-proof online and on paper, but her babbling tongue could make more than a few holes in it all on its own. It already had—though fortunately Oliver had let his discovery of her 'brother' go with surprising ease so far. Then again, if he already knew about Doctor Adam Pierson (from whoever he might go to for a digital background check that wasn't her), then it could be that he was just waiting for her to explain her seemingly estranged big brother whenever she was ready.

"Do you want to show us some of the forms—or katas—that you know?" Oliver asked her, his tone still more playful than serious. Unexpected, but doubtlessly as much in response to her unhidden nerves as her non-answer.

"I guess," Felicity agreed, thinking quickly through the many drills she knew to find something that wouldn't look like it'd been practiced day-and-night for centuries on end because it could be the difference between death and eternity for her.

And it showed in the training of the times. Yes, in modern times accidents happened, and they had in the ancient days of her youth, as well as all the time in between. But back when she was still really young, however, training was all about the battles to come, and survival. Not safety, nor even skill for the most part.

None of which had been easy for her to learn back then.

She was still a child when she'd started wearing her mother's crown, but she'd had to learn to rule then, so she had. She'd learned to temper her anger with wisdom—though at first it wasn't her own. Justice was tempered by mercy and restraint, otherwise it was only vengeance, and it might beget more vengeance all on its own. Knowledge was power, and peace was preferable to war, but some
wars weren't to be avoided. So she'd had to learn to send men to their deaths. And she had.

And when she became an Immortal, she had to learn to fight with a blade in her hand. Eligius and her other teachers during her mortal life had taught her to block with it, to dodge and dance around an attacker till help arrived, but sometimes there was no help coming and the only safety was in fighting. Killing. Methos had taught her what her First Death had already shown: that a weapon in hand was meant to be wielded, and wielded well. So she did.

Of course, the techniques she was most comfortable with—either those taught to her first by her husband and improved by Methos, or all she'd learned among the Amazons—wouldn't work. Everything she'd learned in ancient times had been about ending the fight as quickly as possible, and while that'd included various disarming techniques, they'd be too violent for this. True sword work, after all, wasn't any kind of game; despite the fact that it was The Game. A sword in hand and an opponent opposite you meant a death. Hopefully not her own.

All of that was no help here as she followed her boyfriend over to the mats where he was waiting patiently. Not even looking like he noticed how much longer it was taking her to walk over there.

Oliver might not favor the sword as a weapon, but he obviously had some experience with it, and what he didn't know about sword fighting—or swordplay, as it was now named—he more than made up for with his sheer skill in unharmed combat and archery. Should she show him the skills she favored, he'd recognize the abrupt uncompromising violence of the techniques. Which wouldn't fit with something she could've learned from a few weekends at Renaissance Fairs or even a few years spent studying under the supervision of some guy in Vegas. It wasn't anything at all like either Oliver or Digg would expect from their I.T girl. No, he was likely assuming that her interest in swords had been kindled by some fantasy series or another—movies, books, or something similar—and that an appreciation for both fitness, discipline and maybe finesse kept her going to whatever classes she'd started as a result.

Her claim that her interest was engendered through historical re-enactments might've had some part in shutting down the questions she didn't want to answer, though that could've just been that she clearly didn't want to answer questions. However much referencing the S.C.A worked in her favor, it wasn't perfect. From what she'd seen of them the sword-work most of them did was far from historically accurate. Safety came first, after all.

And not much like what her skills played towards, either. Safe, or not.

No. Now, she'd have to present this more as an art that came easily to her because it was also a science; a duel—or whatever they called fencing bouts these days—was a systematic study of your opponent that was won by both skill with the sword and simply spotting weakness's faster than the one that you were dancing against—or maybe she should think of it as 'with' in this context?
It was a wily line the ancient had to walk here, between portraying enough skill (to make it clear she wasn't defenseless), and not too much skill (because there'd be more questions she couldn't answer).

There were many, many reasons she hadn't wanted to admit to martial skills of any kind after she'd agreed to join Oliver Queen and John Diggle's nighttime activities. But the reasons she'd changed her mind had added up quickly too...

"Any time now, Felicity," Oliver encouraged her, a glint in his eyes and a small smile at his mouth —visibly all teasing, but the gentle tone of his words clearly meant to be reassuring.

Okay.

Felicity made herself take a deep breath, then took that last step onto the mat to stand across from the still uncharacteristically patient vigilante. Then, after only a second's thought, she shifted into one of the many resting stances she'd practiced more times than anyone could count.

Maybe she should've picked a foil, and fencing instead. The lighter blade might be more of what the watching men was expecting, though not if he thought her interest had been engendered by fantasy movies or novels. But she'd personally never liked the light thrusting weapon. For an Immortal it was more of a hindrance than a help, being unable to decapitate your opponent the second you saw a chance, confining yourself to stabbing at them instead.

And Oliver had already accepted that the relatively harmless wooden swords the S.C.A regulated for heavy combat was a wise choice. He was raising his own, now, so she shouldn't be contemplating if maybe she should have brought one of her own swords tonight.

True, it wasn't like Felicitas didn't have more than a few to choose from: two of them just upstairs, one just inside the door and the other in her car. Well, actually there were three in car. One was supposed to be there, but the other two should be down here. One under her desk and another spare someplace else nearby. It was her usual modus operandi for any place she spent a lot of her time, but she hadn't had a chance to hide the extra two yet because either Oliver and/or Digg was always here. Mostly Oliver. She'd get around to it eventually though.

But that'd have to be something she thought about later. Right now she had to show Oliver something that'd hopefully convince him that no, she didn't need self-defense lessons, thank you very much, without also making him realize that she really didn't need self-defense lessons.
Well, I hope that was worth the wait!
Apologies to those that have expressed dislike for Felicity's lengthy inner monologues, but she has a lot of history and considering that history remains the driving difference in this crossover it's not really something I can just skip over. Nor am I inclined to, as her history is how this crossover's happening in the first place.
And yes, I know that it was a bit of a tease to go all the way up to that point and stop. Sorry. But I don't want the actual sparring to be from Felicity's P.O.V. Don't worry, though, I'm not going to skip it. You'll just have to wait till the next scene... which, as it turns out isn't going to take anywhere near as long as this one did, because it's almost already done. :-) 
Even better? We really are almost to the point in this story that I've already prewritten a bunch of scenes for! Ergo, not nearly as long between updates! :-D
A million thanks to everyone that's volunteer their help here so far. You've all been great. As have the rest of you who've commented and kudo's, too. But two thank you's in particular:
One, to Pen37 for all of your advice on swords, sword fighting and the S.C.A. You've been amazing. All of your help down that rabbit hole's been immensely appreciated, and probably kept me from getting lost in wonderland quite as long as I otherwise might have. So: thank you. :-) 
Two, to the fellow writer that shall remain anonymous for now. As you could probably tell from our email exchanges, etc., I am very excited by the idea of another Arrow/Highlander crossover. That you actually want it based upon the Felicitas-verse, of course made it all the more flattering. From what I saw in the short excerpt you sent me last your story will be spinning off too far back for a lot of 'present' specifics to matter, never mind some of your particulars (maybe) being somewhat different. But I still find myself fascinated by the idea alone, never mind what you actually manage to do with it. I can't wait to see what you continue to come up with going forward. So keep up the wonderful work! And thank you. :-D
As always, thanks to everyone that's reading. Comments are always appreciated, adored and enshrined. (Okay, maybe not the last one, but occasionally a comment inspires the thought!) As I indicated earlier, the next update shouldn't take nearly as long.
Bye for now!
Jess S
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

OK, I’m a little nervous that some of you won't like what I came up with here, so apologies in advance if that's the case. Hopefully it makes sense. Try to enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Oliver Queen's P.O.V.*

Oliver watched as the blonde danced through her sword moves with the obvious ease of long practice, her gracefully fluid motions reminding him a lot of Shado, even though the Chinese woman had never wielded a sword in front of him.

The comparisons his mind made weren't unexpected.

Although the sword was Slade's weapon of choice, the former A.S.I.S operative had half a foot more height and plenty more muscle, and all that *before* the Mirakuru and the madness. Though his former friend's fighting skill—ruthless and aggressive even before the Japanese-made super-soldier serum made him mad—wasn't what Oliver wanted to think about as he watched Felicity flow from one form to another. Not when such thoughts brought to mind another blonde woman he'd known, who hadn't been fortunate enough to survive her own last encounter with him.

No. Shado was much safer to think about; despite her tragic and still very traumatic death. Shado and Felicity had far more in common than Felicity and Slade anyway. Not only in size and shape—though they were more similar there, too. And those physical similarities clearly transferred to how the women moved, too. Graceful, deliberate... and far more gentle with Oliver than he could ever deserve.

That gentleness wasn't just movement and touch though: it was part of them both. Who Felicity was, and who Shado had been. More than how deliberately Shado had drawn back that first bowstring for him, and how Felicity was being almost as careful of hitting him as he was of her. More than how calmly and caringly Felicity had changed the bandages on his gunshot wound—checking on it far more often than Oliver would've chosen to do himself those first few days. More than how delicately Shado had washed his hands of the blood he'd stained them with while protecting her...

He was even more unworthy of Felicity than he'd been of Shado. Yao Fei’s daughter had had
nowhere to go: no way off the island that her father had been executed on. Back then, even after Fyers, Oliver had still been more boy than man, so Shado's kind heart had taken him in. Had been a bright spot amongst all the Island's hell. For Oliver and Slade. But she should have been with Slade. He wouldn't have hesitated to commit to her, and maybe they could've made each other happy. Maybe they'd both still be alive now...

\textit{Swish!}

Oliver groaned as he ducked under another swing of the blonde's sword, letting instinct lead him that far, but ruthlessly suppressing the follow-up that his body would've normally blown through—and at least put her on the floor as he did it. At least.

He'd agreed with Diggle, that protecting Felicity had to be one of their top priorities when she first signed on. Still did. Seeing the damn Dodger's collar around her neck, her eyes wide with the terror, hadn't reduced his protective instincts at all. They'd both been impressed that she'd soldiered on through that terror, though he could've done without her first instinct being to run away—to get the bomb away from \textit{him}—when she realized he didn't have a failsafe plan for that horrific contingency. Getting away from the other partygoers, fine, but \textit{he} was the one that was supposed to keep \textit{her} safe. Telling her she had to keep working—had to help him save her life—before hurrying away, hadn't been easy. But there hadn't been any other choice, and she'd been amazing.

Maybe that was why he'd asked her to go to Tommy's birthday dinner. He hadn't actually planned it out, it'd just sort of happened. Which might be why he asked her to go \textit{just as friends'}—something billionaire playboy Oliver Queen had never done in his life. Then again, that could've all had just as much to do with how easily she made him smile; with how easily that continued even after she found him bleeding out in her car's backseat.

Comparatively, the wound Felicity had tried to hide from him—from both him and Digg—was relatively minor. On either man, in fact, it would've barely been worth noticing. But both of them were a lot bigger than her, and she wasn't supposed to bleed. Just like Shado wasn't supposed to die and her death wasn't supposed to help the Mirakuru drive Slade mad...

\textit{Swish-Swish—CLACK!}

Oliver's frown had more to do with his own thoughts than their swords sliding along each other for a second—though he had to blink at how quickly Felicity danced away: too fast for him to even consider any of the disarming techniques. Not that most of the moves he generally used would be of use here—not when he wasn't remotely willing to hurt her. Just the sight of the injury, of her bleedings, was an alarming reminder of how Shado's death had driven Slade mad: alarming because the rage the immediately surged inside him at the sight told Oliver that he'd fare no better with the same fate if it were Felicity...
Swish—Swish... Swish-Swish-Swish—CLACK!

Oliver was trying to shake that thought off as their fake swords hit against each other again. It wouldn't help him. It wouldn't help Felicity.

Why his thoughts kept drifting back around towards Slade while they played with fake swords wasn't hard to figure out. The Australian had been his first real teacher, and no matter what he'd said to Shado after she'd joined them, he had taught Oliver more than a few things. And a few of them had stuck. The vigilante wouldn't ever call himself a swordsman after the fact—the bow would always be his weapon of choice, followed by his fists—but Slade Wilson had every reason to say he liked swords after he agreed to try and whip the billionaire castaway into shape. And he was a swordsman in every sense of the word...

Now, the man that'd been his last real student—and, looking back on it, maybe his first, too—couldn't help but compare the slender, curvy blonde to the hard, harsh man that'd saved his life more than once. Slade almost always attacked, instead of defending. He'd lectured Oliver once that sticking to just defense gave your opponent time to outthink you—not giving them that time, and being faster, and better, tended to mean you came out on top. At least until you didn't. It hadn't been easy for the deadly man to hold back, even when he was truly trying to teach Oliver. That was why he'd very quickly switched to teaching him stick-fighting and some hand-to-hand much more than swordsmanship.

Felicity, however, didn't seem uncomfortable sticking to defense. Dancing around and blocking the blows he sent her way—and only very occasionally striking out herself. Then again, how often he was missing her entirely—both their swords swishing through the air—gave him some hope for her aptitude. It was indicative of a knack for dodging, at least, which was undoubtedly how she'd escaped the punk that'd tried to hurt her not too far from here—dodging and running the wrong way. She just hadn't dodged far enough. But her passive, laid-back approach was probable indicative of how she'd learned: training for fun, not life and death. Then again, each time she did attempt a hit made perfect sense.

And she knew how to move with the wooden 'weapon.' The fast, simple motions looked like something his I.T girl was comfortable with. Maybe too comfortable?

She clearly had to be pushed outside of that comfort zone, or what skill she had would never be of much use. He had to help her learn how to react, rather than thinking everything through—because in a real fight you didn't tend to have the time.

Helena likely wouldn't give her any time to think if their paths ever crossed. But the Huntress
shooting back into town wasn't what he was supposed to be thinking about right now...

No. Oliver shook that thought off, forcing himself to focus on the here and now, and the remarkable woman that was in front of him.

The outfit Felicity had changed into didn't leave much to the imagination. Sure, her feet were effectively hidden away in her sneakers. The leggings, though, hugged snugly as they stretched up her legs—making them look impossibly long. The puffy windbreaker she had zipped all the way up wasn't so form fitting, but it showed off some of her curves. And, unlike the black leggings and black sneakers, her windbreaker was dark green. Almost the same shade as his hood. *His* green...

Oliver barely managed to dodge the jab she sent at his head, and he could see from her small smile that she had a good guess as to what had him distracted. Not that that excused her missing: she wouldn't have if she'd actually been aiming for his face and not the air beside his ear. He couldn't really call her on it, though: he'd done the same thing just a minute ago, only he'd been aiming a few inches farther off.

If her aim was actually that good, then the only problem was whether or not she'd be able to land the blow—be it a jab, strike or slash—if she was crossing swords with someone that would hurt her... In the most unlikely event that said someone's weapon of choice was a sword and not a gun. Because there couldn't be that many Slade Wilsons and Tatsu Yamashiros in the world... Or Billy Wintergreens and Chien Na Weis...

Then again, Felicity's grandfather was killed by some crazy swordsman, wasn't he? Before his body burned—almost beyond recognition, head and all, according to the ARGUS-flagged cold case file of his homicide. In some sick ritual that ARGUS had found repeated all over the world, going back years, but done nothing about, other than make note of it. Something Oliver should probably ask his new girlfriend about, but even the thought of trying to ask made all the words lock up deep in his chest.

What was he supposed to say? 'By the way, when I had your background check done by a shady intelligence organization I can't entirely trust, ever, they didn't find anything on Felicity Smoak that I didn't already know or could've easily guessed. But they did flag the cold case file for your granddad's bizarre murder, because it turned out it wasn't that bizarre? And was that why you really studied swords? Even though it happened almost twenty years before you were born?'

*Swish... Whap!*

Oliver stepped around her next strike, then whacked the fake blade away with his hand rather than
the wooden weapon he was supposed to be using.

Felicity frowned, but didn't say anything as she backed off a step, her brilliant eyes studying him as her mind rapidly moved on instead of focusing on what was already done.

Diggle, though, wasn't so forgiving. And just watching got boring after a while. "That's cheating, Queen," he called with a smirk. "You're supposed to be pretending the swords are real. Right?"

The question was directed at the blonde, whose frown returned as she sighed. "Well, yeah, but—"

"Yeah," Digg cut in, still smirking. "And a real one of those would've taken your hand off, probably. Or at least cut it in half."

"Thought you didn't know anything about swords?" the vigilante shot back.

"Don't know swords," the other man agreed. "But I know knives just fine. 'Bout the same thing, isn't it, just a bit bigger?"

"Not really," Felicity surprised both of them by saying. When they looked at her, she was grimacing like she wasn't sure she should've said that, but she continued anyway. "Strictly speaking, knives are for cooking—most don't actually make good weapons. The fighting knives you studied in the army are really more like daggers. They blade, at least, it bigger—and more importantly stronger. Durable."

"Not likely to break," Oliver nodded, though the semantics of whether or not the word 'knife' was right didn't really matter. Someone who must've been at least somewhat important had decided on it at some point, and it'd stuck. Whether or not that made it right, he couldn't argue either way.

"So you're saying a sword's more like a big dagger than a big knife?" the ex-soldier spelled out, still amused.

The blonde winced. "Not exactly?"

Seeing that standing there talking about this was just giving her brilliant brain too much time to
think, Oliver said, "On guard." He waited almost a full second before he started his attack—a lot longer than he tended to give Diggle. Forewarning wasn't something he was big on, either, but with Felicity he would much prefer to be safe; never sorry.

**WHAP!**

*Swish...*

His girlfriend then swung her whole form around, like her body was a lissome extension of the blade. Again, far more graceful than could've hoped—more competent, too, than she seemed to think herself.

**WHAP! WHAP! WHAP!**

"Daggers were around before swords. I think," Felicity went on as she blocked three more of his careful attacks in quick, easy succession. "They, um, probably evolved from them as metalworking improved."

*Swish...*

"Got bigger. Longer."

*Swish-Swish...*

"And knives are the other side of that?" Digg suggested thoughtfully.

*Swish—*

"Probably," Felicity agreed, breathing evenly as she sidestepped Oliver's next attack: forcing him to quickly pull back. But she didn't even try to take advantage of that split second where Slade would've nailed him. Tatsu would have, too: any serious swordsman surely would. But that was the kind of thinking you acquired while training for life or death scenarios. Or experiencing them. Not playing at a sport or any kind of game.
Oliver almost said something. But none of Slade's harsh, apt reproofs sounded right in his head. Shado had taught him Mandarin, Cantonese and archery—and only a little close-quarters combat techniques: hand-to-hand, not swords. It made him wish he'd had more time among the Yamashiro's once Tatsu learned to like him. She probably would've made a better teacher than Slade. Though the abandoned A.S.I.S agent would undoubtedly have fared better against Chien Na Wei.

The sheer viciousness and brutality Oliver had only started to learn under Slade Wilson's violent mentorship had served him well many times since, but it was no help for teaching the woman he was falling in love with anything. No: it was necessary to teach her some self-defense, but the brutality that came to the vigilante so easily when he wore the Hood wasn't something Oliver ever wanted anywhere near Felicity. Ever.

"You could've hit him there, Felicity," Diggle pointed out a moment later, his tone mild, and the gentle scrutiny on his face no more off-putting than his huge crossed arms were. "When you dodged, he was over-extended for a second."

"Yeah, but I don't want to hit him."

Her response made him stop, and the way she lowered her 'sword' at the same time he did didn't make the corners of his mouth stop sinking.

"What?" Oliver questioned.

Felicity frowned right back at him. "I don't want to hurt you, Oliver. Anymore than you want to hurt me."

And something in her eyes made him think this was really more about him not even trying to hit her than whether or not she wanted to hit him. His frown deepened all the more. "Felicity, that's why we're using fake swords, remember? They're wood wrapped in duct-tape—they're not gonna cut my arm off."

"That doesn't mean they won't hurt. That they won't bruise: just like a club would," his I.T girl insisted stubbornly, meeting him frown for frown. "That's why you haven't really tried to hit me, either."

Oliver sighed, not particularly liking that he'd read her right. "I'm evaluating your skill level,
Felicity. Not attacking you, or even training you yet."

"We're watching how you move," Digg backed him up: tone still calm and not judging. "Seeing what you can do."

But the blonde rolled her eyes. "Even the Scadian fighters hit each other."

"So you shouldn't have any problem hitting me," Oliver tried.

"Tempting as that is right now," Felicity sent it right back. "You're not wearing any of the armor the S.C.A requires, Oliver. You're not even wearing a shirt, let alone padding."

"I almost never do while I'm training," he reminded her, just to see how she'd respond. "Digg doesn't either."

"Don't think you want me in that part of this fight, man," Diggle said from the sideline.

"No, it's fine," Felicity shook her head. "'Cause as much as I appreciate all the shirtlessness—and I really, really do—that doesn't make me want to hurt you."

Oliver couldn't come up with an easy rebuttal for that: not because he'd care about a couple extra bruises on himself—he wouldn't, especially if it meant Felicity could better protect herself. But he knew she wasn't wrong about his not wanting to hurt a hair on her head either. So he was relieved when Digg spoke up again, despite his warning just a second ago.

"Kinda comes with the territory, Felicity," the ex-soldier told her gently. "May come a time you have to hurt someone to protect yourself."

"Already did," Oliver reminded him darkly. The image of that small slice into her slender shoulder not about to leave his mind anytime soon. There were more than a few bad memories in there, of course, but injuries on someone he cared about—especially Felicity—that was a lot work.

Felicity sighed. "Oliver, you really have to let that go. I'm perfectly fine."
He scowled at her, "That cuts not even a scar yet, and when it is I still won't like the fact that it happened in the first place."

"How about you both agree to at least lightly tap each other a few times, and maybe we won't be standing here all night?" Diggle tried to referee.

"I will if he does," Felicity sighed, not looking happy to be saying it, but he didn't think she was lying either.

"Fine," Oliver agreed, though he knew holding up his end of that agreement wouldn't be easy. No matter how amused Diggle looked at all of the feints and dodges the vigilante had been making, without mixing in even light taps for the blows that he normally wouldn't dish out to his friend. "On guard," he said again.

Felicity raised her sword, waiting for him to attack. When he did, she stepped out of the way again, as agile as any dancer.

*Swish*...

But Digg was his friend, not his girlfriend. Former Special Forces, too. Trained, disciplined, and built like a tank with bowling balls for arms.

*Swish-Swish.*

Not more than half a foot shorter than the vigilante with a bright bouncing ponytail and equally bright blue eyes behind the glasses she was still wearing. He'd considered telling her to take them off, but then decided that her wearing them was another reminder that he didn't want to even tap anywhere near her face... though that didn't seem to be a problem since he couldn't even work himself up to tapping anywhere else, either... at least not with the wooden stick.

The thought made the edges of Oliver's mouth tilt up, because it was all too easy to imagine her saying something like that and then attempting to backtrack but ending up babbling through even more double-entendres... When she ducked low to take a swipe at his feet, he made himself focus again.
Felicity was clearly used to fencing—no, she said it wasn't fencing... not fighting, maybe sparring? or play-fighting?—with people who were taller than her; each time she stepped into a defensive stance it was clearly angled towards parrying or blocking a blow from on high. Not a bad thing, since most men would have a considerable height—and reach—advantage on her. But maybe something he should comment on; if only because it was possible, however unlikely, that she might meet someone shorter than her with a sword in hand at some point.

Oliver didn't like to think about it, but it was entirely possible that being involved with him—and everything that came with him—could put her in danger. Again. That was why he'd taken up the argument with her after she'd repeatedly shut Digg down. That was why he'd said he'd supervise at least this part of her 'training' when Digg said he knew next to nothing about swords.

"You know," Felicity spoke up even as she kept moving through the flowing steps she was demonstrating. "I would've thought you'd want to actually test me with a sword." She blinked, as she paused when he did, rolling her eyes when she heard Diggle's amused snort from a few feet away and the little smile that'd returned to her the archer's face. Then she deliberately whacked her 'blade' against his a little harder. "That one, I mean." When both of them waited expectantly for her to start babbling, she sighed. "No. There are just too many suggestive sayings that correlate automatically to swordplay, that one wasn't even that bad."

Oliver raised a brow at her, a little disappointed, but still vaguely amused both by her irritation with their expecting her blushing babbles and wondering exactly how many times she'd told herself before this that she wasn't going to let her tongue slip about swords. "I thought you didn't want any training?" he asked, pretending he hadn't noticed what she was correcting herself on even as he started to circle her again, watching carefully as she started dancing through more steps her feet knew well.

She gracefully completed the maneuver, before pointing the fake sword's rounded tip at the floor as she stopped. "I don't. But I didn't think that mattered to you."

The vigilante's smile immediately dropped into a frown. "It matters," Oliver reassured her with a sigh, shaking his head before he made himself feign another attack—jabbing the fake weapon over her shoulder instead of towards her face or neck to make sure he'd miss if she didn't dodge.

She did, dancing away as gracefully as she'd done everything else once the nerves had started to fade.

"But you're too smart to not know you should be able to defend yourself, Felicity." He waited for what felt like an eternity before he attacked again, once more ready to pull the blow if it looked like she couldn't block it.
His tech expert girlfriend surprised him again, however, as she deflected him with an ease that again reminded him of Slade Wilson—making his mind briefly flash back to the many moments when the older man had been trying to teach him swordplay with little (and at first no) success. The obvious disparity between them—the rich boy who’d never really fought a day (let alone anyone during a day) in his life and the man that Australia had sent to kill people many times before he was stranded on Lian Yu—had been too obvious for even Oliver to miss. And the feelings of inadequacy it’d engendered made him reluctant to even try and learn what the other man was trying to pound into him until Slade wisely presented it as the simple thing it was, the same thing Yao Fei had called it from the start: survival. Such thoughts weren't at all what he ever would've expected around Felicity Smoak, but the reminiscence remained as she parried attack after attack, very noticeably holding back.

Then again, Oliver wasn't the boy he was five years ago—he was holding back, too. And he knew the beautiful blonde at least well enough to see it was starting to irritate her just as much as it was amusing their friend. So he slowly stopped, steadily increasing his speed and the strength behind his attacks... until he was honestly stunned that she was still meeting him blow for blow.

...Until she made herself trip.

Oliver was so surprised that he only had time to pull his own attack—himself and his 'blade'—back and watch her fall face-down on the mat: there just wasn't time to catch her when she'd literally thrown herself face-first at the floor mats.

"Damn, girl," Diggle spoke up from the top of the stairs, where he'd been watching them for the last minute or so. "You were going pretty good there."

"Thanks," Felicity replied breathlessly—much more breathlessly than she should be, considering the ease with which she'd kept pace with him the last several minutes.

Whatever she said, and apparently demonstrated, Felicity Smoak was neither out of shape nor out of practice.

Oliver wasn't all that good at telling lies, particularly to this woman it seemed. But he was very good at spotting them.

The question was: why was Felicity lying about this?
Well, that was only one question. Another was: Why didn't she want to talk about her brother? Half or step, he still didn't know because she'd dodged the few questions he'd tried so far... though it bothered him more because he didn't like that the reason she might not want to talk about the man might be why the ARGUS file on him was weirdly thin and non-explanatory. Almost like even Amanda Waller's people didn't know much about him. (He wasn't sure if he'd prefer that to Amanda just not telling him more because of what she did know and didn't want to share, for whatever reasons...)

Oliver almost asked, again, but knew better than to do so right now. It'd already been proven more than once that the girl he was offering his hand to help up off the floor would answer more questions while cuddling on her couch, or something similar, than she ever would with weapons of any kind in hand. So he only cocked his head to the side, watching for a second as she leaned over a little to continue feigning being completely out of breath.

Something that wouldn't make sense even if he hadn't so carefully upped the test moments before, because he'd seen how easy normal exercise was for her, too. Since he'd learned that she sometimes went jogging in the middle of the night, he'd followed her more than once. Which she knew, because the last few times she'd made a point of letting him catch up until it was easier to just run with her rather than try to pretend he wasn't keeping an eye on her.

"You are pretty good," Oliver allowed after a few long moments, cocking an eyebrow back at her when she raised both of hers at him. "Too good for fencing recreationally 'years ago.' Or playing lady-knight a long time ago, too."

Felicity took a deep breath as she shrugged, turning towards the weapons wall to put her saber back—correctly checking the blade for any signs of damage or the like before she actually returned it to its place. "Not that long ago," she admitted with her back still turned to them, shrugging again as she turned around unarmed. "And like I said, sword, uh, play comes pretty easily to me."

Oliver considered her, wondering why she'd stumbled over the term 'sword play,' again something that reminded him of Slade Wilson. The swordsman had thought it ridiculous calling anything that involved a real weapon 'playing.' Oliver agreed, but it was a strange sentiment to hear in the voice of a girl that'd supposedly learned the art for fun. He shook the thought off as he pointed out, "But you can't carry a sword everywhere, Felicity. Some hand-to-hand self defense lessons would still be a good idea." He indicated their other team member as he went on. "With either me or Diggle, it's up to you."

The big blue eyes considered him for a very long feeling second before she finally sighed. "Fine." She looked at Diggle. "Tomorrow okay for you?"
Oliver was a little disappointed as he watched Diggle nod, but not surprised at her choice. Not at her choice, at least.

What did surprise him was the thought that passed through his head; that she'd picked the ex-soldier because she thought Diggle would be less likely to notice any particular skill she already possessed.

The former Special Forces soldier had much more regimented training than Oliver did. Sure, he'd picked some stuff up along the way, but not like Oliver had. Ergo, for a supposed beginner he'd lean back more to his 'basic' training, and maybe not notice signs that Felicity Smoak knew a lot more than she was letting on.

Because she did.

How she did, and why she was hiding it, were what would have him watching over their 'lessons' even more so than he'd initially planned...

"Think I'll take a shower," Felicity said then, walking towards the washroom she'd made him have installed down here weeks ago, despite the hassle it'd been to hide everything while a few workmen put it together. She stopped in the doorway to look back at him though. "You're not hooding up right away, right? I didn't get anymore alerts on Bertinelli. Either of them."

"Not just yet," Oliver shook his head. "We'll be here when you come back out. Take your time."

"Thanks," her smile was warm again.

And he was almost starting to get used to the way that smile made him feel warmer, too. Even with countless questions wanting to be asked inside his head.

Once the door closed behind her, Oliver walked over to the box she'd brought the fake swords in, putting both of them back inside before closing them up. Not bothering to move the box yet though, not when he didn't know where would be the best place to put it. Instead, he waited for the sound of running water to start before he turned to his bodyguard, making himself meet Digg's eyes and focus on what they had to talk about rather than the thought of his girlfriend in the nearby shower.
"Girl's got some more surprises," Diggle said quietly from the chair he'd seated himself in about halfway through the short sparring session. Once he was sure his intervention clearly wasn't going to be necessary as long as the archer didn't piss their I.T girl off.

"Yeah," Oliver sighed. "I noticed."

"Some more secrets, too."

"Yeah," the vigilante sighed again, not liking any of the ways his mind could turn with this. "Yeah, she does."

There was an unlikely possibility that she was some sort of spy, of course. Waller wouldn't be above planting someone in his path like that, and he'd learned more than once that ARGUS operatives came in various shapes in forms—some more willingly than others. The idea of her being trapped like he'd been made his jaw clench, but it didn't seem likely. Felicity had already been working at Q.C back when he'd snuck in for ARGUS years ago: and he didn't doubt she could've hacked into the files they'd supposedly needed his fingerprint to steal. So it seemed unlikely, but not necessarily beyond Amanda Waller.

Still, it was barely a passing thought, really, because it just didn't fit Felicity Smoak. Sure, she had secrets. But she was just so innately honest that she couldn't keep the fact that she had secrets a secret. Not exactly spy material, let alone ARGUS.

Much more likely was the idea that her learning how to use swords had more than a little to do with her grandfather's death. The strange homicide that, as it turned out, wasn't all that unusual. The only thing Oliver had come up with thinking about it was maybe it was some sort of secret society where arguments were still settled with duels, like they had been a long time ago, according to various movies he'd watched that may or may not have been historically accurate. The idea of Felicity needing to learn how to defend herself with a sword because she'd been born into a group that required it of its members, or something like that, was even more unsettling than the unwilling spy idea. But given what he'd read in the relatively untouched ARGUS file on the matter, it was the only thing that made sense.

Oliver froze as his mind made the next leap there: and it wasn't one he liked any more than any of the ones before.

Felicity had been attacked outside of Verdant by someone with a blade. He'd assumed it was a knife. So had Digg. But instead of running back inside to safety or even just telling them once she'd somehow managed to escape on her own, she'd tried to hide the injury she'd received in the
process. Could that actually mean there really was someone out there that wanted to settle a score with Felicity by chopping her head off and setting her on fire?

"Not a bad thing," Digg spoke up again, continuing with a shrug when the vigilante immediately frowned at him. "It's good that she knows how to defend herself a little bit. Should make teaching her more easier." He shook his head slowly, dark eyes fixed on his employer's probably very unhappy face. "Be easier still if we had some idea of what she already knew."

Oliver nodded. "And why."

The former soldier frowned, "Why?" his eyes narrowed a little. "You think it's more than the S.C.A thing?"

"Might be... her grandfather could've been killed by a swordsman."

The only sort of 'proof' they had of that were the notes in the ARGUS files about some swordfights being witnessed from afar, but there was also the fact that there weren't that many weapons that could actually decapitate someone very easily. There really were many other ways that were much easier to kill someone, but decapitation followed by burning seemed to be the M.O that tied the far too many deaths together.

And Felicity's grandfather could've died that way.

And she was better with a sword than she wanted them to know. Maybe much better.

What else was he supposed to think?

Diggle's heavy sigh sounded like how he was feeling right now. "And here I thought the archery was old-school."

Oliver couldn't even make himself to roll his eyes.
Well, there's a training scene, at least. Again, I'm sorry if that wasn't what everyone wanted, but I didn't really want to use it as a big reveal scene. I just can't see Felicity finally telling the truth that way. But I can see Oliver and Diggle noticing more than she wants them to, and coming to their own conclusions. Add in the ARGUS investigation, and maybe they're a little too on point, but I thought it worked.

Apologies if there were any terrible typos. I wanted to get this out before I leave (later today). I'm flying to Orland for a short family vacation - my nieces want to see Disney World. I'll probably be writing a bit down there, but odds are I won't actually post anything from my laptop. As long as our rental has Wi-Fi that works like it's supposed to, I should still be able to respond to comments and what not, so fingers crossed. I will keep working on this, and my other story, of course, but I can't promise an update super soon. This trip kind of throws a wrench into my routine, and when I come back work should be getting a lot busier for a while. Fingers crossed that I won't keep you hanging too long...

Comments do help, even if I'm not always great about responding in a timely manner. Ideas, encouragement, and constructive criticisms alike. Keep feeding the muses and they keep running around in circles like crazy people: somehow chapters emerge as a result. Thanks in advance.

Also, I may go back and change the previous chapter. A few of you commented that it would've flown better with flashbacks, so I've been going through it again. If I do change anything, I'll make note of it, of course, but more ideas there are always appreciated.

Thanks for reading. :-)

Jess S
Thank you to everyone who wished me a nice vacation: it was marvelous! Enjoy the new scene! :-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*John Diggle's P.O.V.*

*Click-Click.*

*BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM!* 

John didn’t particularly like to work-out this late. It got the blood pumping and pretty much required a shower before bed unless he wanted to do the laundry early this week.

Worry for the employer that he’d accepted as a friend—almost as soon as he’d accepted his crusade—often kept his heartbeat fast enough as it was. When the daredevil didn’t do something to make it stop for a second or two instead.

*Click-Click-Click. Click.*

*BAM-BAM! BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM!* 

But since they’d brought Felicity into the loop, the computer genius had understandably taken over most of the tech support—including the comms, leaving John to either hover over her shoulder with his arms crossed to keep himself from pacing most of the time.

The blonde didn’t mind him hovering. She’d never even given him a sideways glance about it, which would strike him as odd since she didn’t have any sort of military or intelligence background, but it wasn't any odder than how easily she'd fit into the vigilante's mission, too. Genius I.Q, Las Vegas childhood, M.I.T education and a couple years bored in the I.T department of *Queen Consolidated* didn't exactly translate to how she'd accepted pretty much all of this with relative ease.

Then again, Felicity's family history and at least a certain number of personal history yet untold
hung in the balance, too. And just like she'd accepted Oliver's ridiculous excuses each time they went to her for various kinds of tech help wasn't all that different from her accepting that John just needed to know what was happening rather than waiting for her to tell him. She seemed to worry about both of them enough to explain how she'd understand the bodyguard needing to keep an eye on their boy himself even if it was over her shoulder.

*BAM! BAM! BAM!*

*Click. Click-Click.*

John couldn’t do that now though. Not when he knew his eyes would be straying to the blonde herself more often than the computer screens.

Felicity may not mind him watching over her shoulder, but he was sure she’d notice if he was specifically watching her. Her situational awareness was better than he ever could’ve expected from any tech specialist, after all, and even the most ordinary people could usually sense when someone was watching them. They might not know what the sixth sense that was making the hair on the back of their next stand up was, but that didn't mean they didn't feel it.

*Click-Click. Click-Click.*

*BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM!*

So here he was, pulverizing the punching bag with steady combinations that his body knew well enough to do without much thought involved, while Felicity kept track of the comms while working on her computer and Oliver was out scouring the streets for any signs of his psycho ex. John's eyes were firmly zeroed in on that bag, but his mind was working through their tech genius.

He could be worrying about their latest problem, of course, but he'd already said his piece on the mobster's bloodthirsty daughter—a few times to the fool that'd thought he could save her by dating her—and he didn't want to waste any more thought on that woman than he absolutely had to.

*BAM! BAM! BAM!*

*Click-Click-Click.*

The woman that he had welcomed to the team was much more worthy of thought. Funny, sweet, super smart, but open-minded and beyond resourceful, she was all but a godsend when it came to rounding off pretty much all the areas of their little team that the archer and bodyguard couldn't cover even half as well, if at all. But there was a lot about Felicity Smoak that just didn’t make
John had tried not to focus too much on it at first. He liked the girl even back when she was just the Q.C. I.T girl that Oliver probably went too far too much tech help. He’d suspected from the very first time he saw the two of them together that the chemistry sizzling the air between them had a lot to do with why the vigilante kept going back to her. Oliver would flatly deny it, John was sure, but that was why he’d never bothered to bring it up. If only out of curiosity to see how it might eventually play out.

That, and it’d been reassuring, really, to see that smile that the billionaire couldn’t stop from appearing around the babbling blonde. Enough so that all her disbelieving looks and eye-rolls weren’t worth worrying about when she so clearly had no intention of not helping the Queen heir no matter how stupid the story he told. The ex-soldier knew what war could do to you, so watching even a brief conversation lift a little of the weight off of the vigilante’s shoulders, even if it was only for a very short time, hadn’t been something he’d wanted to mess with.

Click... Click.

BAM! BAM! BAM-BAM!

Click-Click-Click-Click.

John had never imagined, of course, that Oliver would have to resort to telling Felicity the truth in order to escape the police after his mother shot him at the company his family owned and the genius kept insanely long hours at. He’d never forget just how shocked he’d been when she’d appeared in the basement, blood covering her shirt and her hands, her eyes alarmed—but for the man bleeding out in the backseat of her car, not the gun the surprised former soldier had instinctively drawn on her.

Click-Click-Click... Click-Click.

BAM-BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM!

As shocking as it’d been though, it had been even more of a relief. Once the billionaire had stopped coding on the table—and all the machines in the Foundry were working correctly. Because if mere moments in her presence made the vigilante’s world a little brighter, than having her around more often could only help all the more.

The soldier had been surprised again, of course, when the tech girl had challenged the vigilante on the very first name he’d decided to cross off the List once his G.S.W had just finally healed. Not because her questions hadn’t made sense, or because he’d thought for a moment the archer might
hurt the girl, but because it'd been such a change.

Sure, she'd played the part of concerned nurse to a decidedly impatient and unhelpful Oliver very well for a number of weeks before that. Her real and not at all hidden concern the time the man had been stupid and tried to work himself back into shape far too soon—tearing open his wound and losing blood again in the process—had probably done more to make the man take it slow for at least a little while longer than anything John Diggle could've said to him could have.

It hadn't been a problem when the other archer had put the vigilante in the hospital for the holidays. For one thing, Oliver hadn't had his confidence shot by an unexpected beating—even though his mother shooting him, quickly rationalized as 'she was defending herself,' had hit some keys to reset him back to his mother's willing involvement in anything bad being impossible. For another, his family had known he was hurt and he hadn't had to hide it, though all their worry over him had undoubtedly been even more aggravated by the fact that they had lost him before. And then there was Walter's kidnapping to consider, too. Still, that his mother had had a copy of the List, and Walter's questions about it had led to him being kidnapped couldn't be denied, so it'd taken more than a few arguments to keep the billionaire from pushing himself too far while his body was on the mend. How she'd gotten him to agree to not even trying hooing up again until he wasn't hurt anymore, John Diggle wasn't entirely sure, even though he'd been there for every one of their arguments about it. The only thing he could say for sure was the she'd somehow gotten the vigilante to agree that there would be no more vigilantism until he could climb that 'stupid salmon ladder of his' without fault or further injury. And that night when Oliver had been ready to head out again had been the first time he'd been able to meet the requirement.

Felicity challenging the vigilante that night, the first time the Hood came out again, and about the List, had been something else entirely. It had seemed like quite a change from the pretty girl that just cocked her head to the side or occasionally gave the billionaire a sideways look or sigh at some of his more bizarre requests.

Click-Click.

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

Click-Click-Click.

But Felicity Smoak really was a genius. With a mind for much more than just her computers. So Digg had never ruled out whether or not she hadn't called 'this' all along. Or at least some time before she found the man in the green Hood bleeding out in the backseat of her car.

It was hard to say when, exactly, she might've figured it out.
Oliver had been going to her for computer help before his bodyguard even found out that his employer was more than just a billionaire who’d come back from the dead as an escape artist.

Click-Click.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Click-Click.

Both the vigilante and the tech genius had mentioned the first request he’d made of her had involved a bullet riddled laptop, which had contained evidence that’d told Oliver that Deadshot was targeting the UNIDAC auction. That the Hood had later stopped the sniper—even if it had unfortunately not been permanently—wasn’t exactly something she could have missed.

Another very likely possibility was when Oliver had had her hack into Blackhawk Security for him. First ever to break through their firewall, Knox had said. No matter what it was Felicity had found there for the Queen heir, she couldn’t have exactly missed that men from the same company she’d hacked were behind the armored car heists and they—like Deadshot—were also stopped by the vigilante.

Click-Click.

BAM-BAM-BAM!

Click-Click.

BAM-BAM!

The Royal Flush Gang—as the media had dubbed the family of thieves that Oliver tried to help in his father’s memory but had ultimately had to stop—were in the news enough, too, for everyone in Starling to at least know of them. That the leader of the gang was the same former Q.C employee Oliver had had Felicity look up couldn't have escaped her attention unless she didn't pay attention to the news. And given how she seemed to track it all better than Oliver and Digg combined now, it wasn't likely she didn't watch it before she joined the team.

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

Click-Click. Click. Click.

Still, the only time Felicity Smoak had really questioned the billionaire on one of his bizarre requests was when he'd brought that giant ass needle still two-thirds full of Vertigo to her at Q.C. Her point there had been a good one, though, they really should’ve put the drug in a bottle or
something. The Count’s deadly cocktail would’ve been suspicious enough without it coming to her in a needle that looked more like a weapon than a medical instrument of any kind. The look she’d given Oliver that time had all but said, ‘I’m trying to pretend I don’t already know you’re the vigilante, but you’re really, really not making it easy.’ And that was before the billionaire’s pathetic response of ‘I ran out of sports bottles.’

That had been a lot more direct than the time she didn’t pretend to believe the billionaire was having her look up an old friend for him when he clearly didn’t know anything about the man that’d once worked for his father but had eventually become a bank robber along with the rest of his family. Then again, it’d been even more blatantly stupid than just Oliver’s inability to actually tell a lie well to her. Not to mention analyzing chemical compounds probably wasn’t the sort of thing anyone asked the average Q.C.I.T specialist for—looking back she’d probably had to head to Applied Sciences to even do it, and while John wouldn’t put it past her to be able to run the sample herself even if she had to hack her way in or just say it was for a member of the Queen family—it’d been asking a lot more than any sort of basic computer work. Still, she'd come through and she'd come through fast.

So it was possible that they shouldn't have been surprised that as soon as her plausible deniability was blown out of the water, whatever it was that'd had her holding her tongue before was gone, too.

Click-Click-Click.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

All the same, the blonde clearly had some secrets of her own.

Her learning how to wield a sword for some fantasy recreational hobby could’ve made sense, if she hadn’t been trying so hard to not show how good she was. That fall of hers had been a thing of beauty, really: she couldn’t have fallen on her face at a better time, because even if her face hitting the mat had been uncomfortable her sword hadn’t been anymore a threat to herself or Oliver than his had been to her at that exact moment in the very brief handful of minutes when the vigilante hadn’t been holding back and it had kind of looked like maybe she still was.

Click-Click. Click-Click.

BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM!

John Diggle didn’t know anything about swords that hadn’t come up in movies, and he couldn’t entirely say that he considered entertainment a good source material. Not when he’d spotted plenty of things movie-makers had gotten wrong regarding soldiers, the Army, or Afghanistan. Or all the
above all at the same time.

He did, however, know sports. And anyone good enough to keep up with Oliver Queen when he was swinging a weapon of any kind around would’ve been steered into competing even if she’d started off learning how to wield a sword for fun. Yet she said she never had. Not that she’d chosen not to because she was focusing on her schoolwork, or that she’d tried it once but didn’t like it. No, she’d said she’d never done it at all, which just didn’t add up. A hot girl like her swinging a sword around back when Xena was still big would’ve been beating the event coordinators off at the very least. The only question would be whether she was using a wooden sword then or her Loud Voice.

Probably her Loud Voice, which he'd so far only seen once. That was the time Oliver seemed about ready to try exercising too soon, again, and she stopped him before he could hurt himself all over again.

Click-Click-Click-Click...

BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM!

Click-Click. Clack... Click-Click.

For some reason Felicity didn’t want them to know how good she was. Just like she didn’t want their help with the cut on her shoulder, even though changing those bandages would’ve been a lot easier for another person that could use both hands.

And John for the life of him couldn’t come up with any good reason for either one of her choices there.

Maybe Oliver was right and she’d learned how to use a sword because of her grandfather. Even though the man was murdered years before she was born... if it was some sort of family tradition even before that it would’ve made sense.

Her hiding that someone had hurt her if it had anything to do with how her grandfather had died, didn’t make nearly as much sense.

She had to know they’d protect her. For all that she’d argued against Oliver putting an arrow in a little boy’s father, she’d barely said a word about the knife wielding assassin. Someone who wanted to hurt her would surely fall closer to the assassin than the white-collar criminal who happened to be a single father.
So why didn’t she want them to know that she could fight, let alone that she knew how because she needed to?

No reason that really made sense came to mind.

It couldn’t be because she didn’t want them to worry—or if that was it, it definitely wasn’t working and wasn’t going to.

She might think that it’d make Oliver more protective her, rather than less. And if anyone was trying to hurt her, she’d be right. The vigilante’s over-protectiveness probably would go a story or two higher up the skyscraper it’d already become. John’s certainly would, too. But even not knowing for sure, both of them were already worried and protective.

What he knew she was working on in the spare time she didn’t really have didn’t help.

Deadshot.

Andy’s killer.

Floyd Lawton.

The sniper that’d shot John’s little brother without meaning to.

The sniper that’d never missed his target any other time since then, save for when the vigilante had interfered at the auction and stopped him with an arrow in his eye. An arrow in the eye that he'd
somehow survived. Just one more instance of Karma and Lady Luck getting really mixed up.

*BAM! BAM! BAM!*

*Click-Click-Click.*

John had already dried up most of his own resources. The only friend he hadn’t yet called about it was his ex-wife.

Not because Lyla couldn’t help. Given her many promotions in the last few years she had to be pretty high up in ARGUS by now. So she undoubtedly could help him look for an international assassin. But she’d want to know why, and John wasn’t any better at lying to her than Oliver was with Felicity.

So the sound of the tech genius’s keys clicking away was hard to ignore for long.

*BAM-BAM!*

*Click-Click.*

*BAM-BAM-BAM!*

*Click-Click-Click.*

*BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM!*

*Click-Click.*

Finally John just stopped, because while he didn’t think he should just come out and ask about one of the things on his mind, he might as well ask about the other. “Find anything yet?”

“Hmm?” Felicity blinked at him as she looked away from her computer screen, but then started shaking her head without awaiting response as his question registered after the fact. “No, he’s still looking for her. Don’t think there’re too many more places he can check though.”

The vigilante had been scouring the city for hours now. With what sounded like no luck whatsoever. So calling it a night soon wouldn't be a bad idea.

“Then he won’t be out too much longer,” John nodded, crossing his arms just to have something to
do with them. “But that wasn’t what I was asking about.”

This time she didn’t blink, but she did wince. “No, sorry. There really hasn’t been much about Deadshot. Even on the Dark Web. Any of them.” Felicity held her hands up quickly. “I am still looking though, really,” she reassured him, shaking her head. “But I don’t know how much longer it might take.”

“Thanks for doing it,” John nodded, not letting himself sigh. “I know you’ve got a lot on your plate already with all of this.”

Felicity shook her head. “Don’t be silly. I’m happy to help.” She cocked her head to the side. “Oliver would be, too, you know.” She said it easily, like she wasn't at all uncomfortable with their teammate not knowing they were still looking for the assassin just yet. But she did seem to have plenty of secrets of her own, never mind how readily she'd kept the vigilante’s, so keeping another for a friend might not be much of a hardship for this girl who, other than all the secrets she clearly had, seemed so honest most of the time.

“Not yet.” John shook his head again. “He’s got more than enough on his plate, too.” He frowned at her in concern. “But it’s not silly to notice that you're burning the candle at both ends, Felicity.”

She shook her head quickly. “No, I’m—”

“It’s almost one in the morning, now. You have to be at work for nine, don’t you?”

Felicity shrugged, like such thoughts weren't worth worrying about. “Like you said, he’ll be back soon.”

But sleep deprivation wasn't something you could just keep shrugging off. Eventually the exhaustion would hit you, and it'd hit you hard. Looking at the blonde as he considered it, John was surprised he didn't see bags below her blue eyes. But women were sometimes adept at hiding such things with make-up, and Felicity had her glasses, too.

“This isn’t the first time you probably won’t be in bed before two or three though.” John told her firmly, not liking the realization at all. “It’s a good way to make yourself sick.”

It was one thing for the bodyguard and the billionaire to not get some shut-eye till about the time
the sun started to come up sometimes. Neither one of them had to be up in the early morning hours if they didn't want to be. Oliver was his day job, and now that he wasn't set on losing him anymore Digg could trust him to be where he said he'd be when needed. Felicity, on the other hand, had another whole job she had to be on time for every day, no matter how late she stayed at her computers the night before.

“I’m fine, John, really,” the tech girl told him with a small smile. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“I will anyway, so will Oliver,” John told her, shaking his head. “We might worry less if we can be sure you’re okay.”

That was starting to edge towards the worries he wasn't supposed to ask her about until they were sure they weren't letting their healthy paranoia create problems that weren't really there, but it just slipped out that way.

Felicity snorted, “Unlike either of you, no one is shooting at me on a regular basis,” she shook her head. “And it’s not like I can tell anyone at work that I need to cut my hours back because of my new night job.”

“Why not?” John shrugged when she raised an eyebrow at her. “You can say you’ve taken over all the tech support for Oliver’s new club. Your supervisor wouldn’t dare question you needing the time for a member of the Queen family.”

“I’m not sure he actually has even that much self-preservation,” Felicity shook her head. She seemed more amused than annoyed, though she'd had one or two unflattering things to say about said supervisor before. Never to Oliver, who might do something about it, though.

"He didn't before, right?" John double-checked.

"I never told him about Oliver before," the blonde shook her head. "He only knows about a few of the times he stopped by, not what it was really about or how often it happened."

Because all too many of the favors the billionaire had asked for had traced very easily back to the vigilante, and for reasons still not said the genius had obviously been covering for him. Which still didn't tell him when, exactly, the blonde had figured it all out, but that made it seem like it must've been a lot earlier than Oliver definitely thought.
The bodyguard frowned, “Then we tell him,” he indicated their teammate via a nod to their comm station, which was obviously muted on her end.

Her soft humming had supposedly made it hard for the vigilante to concentrate on intimidating some street thug a little while back, so the vigilante had made her promise to keep her line muted unless she had something to say. What'd impressed John the most about the B.S there was that he'd actually been able to make himself ask the I.T girl nicely, even though if called on it he'd probably have to confess that the thug in question had been plenty scared of the infamous vigilante.

"If the man’s enough of an idiot to give you trouble, straightening him out is the least Oliver can do."

“Like you said,” the blonde shook her head. “He has enough on his plate.” She went on with a sigh before he could say anything else in argument. “I’m sorry I haven’t found anything about Deadshot yet. I am looking. And I have a few more things to try, it just takes time.”

“I know,” John shook his head. “No apologies necessary.” He assured her, before pressing on. “But you really should cut back at Q.C, Felicity. It’s not like Oliver can’t pay you for working here if you need the money.”

“It’s not about the money,” Felicity shook her head, continuing matter-of-factly. “It’s about perception.” She sighed when he blinked at her, then went on to explain. “Everyone at Q.C knows about Oliver coming to me a lot for tech help, so my helping with the setup here at Verdant makes sense. But there’s already enough water cooler gossip about us without adding me working regularly at the nightclub. A nightclub doesn’t need regular tech help, like a lot of other places they’re fine with occasional consultations.”

That made his frown deepen, “Are your co-workers bothering you that much?”

Because everything else she'd said made sense, but something about that part had sounded a little off. Like she'd realized she hadn't meant to say it as it was coming out, like one of the innuendoes that frequently popped out around Oliver, so she'd started talking faster to get past it. The reputation the billionaire came back home planning to hide behind could've all too easily caused problems for Felicity. Problems that might get worse before they got better when it got out that she was dating the former playboy. Which would definitely happen when she was at his side for Verdant's grand opening.
“Not especially,” Felicity denied, and then sighed again. “But they never really noticed me before, you know? I was used to almost everyone eventually coming to me when they hit a block they couldn’t stumble over on their own, but now that it’s known that Oliver comes to me specifically for technical support a lot more of the higher ups want me, too.” She shook her head. “It was a little easier being more unknown, but Mister Steele had already noticed me anyway, so this was bound to happen.”

“But the water cooler gossip wasn’t.” John kept on it because that was the problematic part of the situation. “Not without Oliver’s old reputation.”

“That’s part of it,” she allowed, then shrugged. “But it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Making him feel a little better only because the motion didn’t trouble hurt—didn’t seem to make her shoulder hurt—so it was one less thing to worry about. What she was saying, however, was still worrying.

"It does bother you," John frowned, and followed up firmly. "And you shouldn't have to handle it alone."

The idea grated. Though their friendship was still somewhat new, with plenty of secrets still left untold, Felicity had started to feel like family very fast. Almost from the very start, she’d been like the little sister he’d never known he’d wanted. And no matter what she wasn’t saying or why, she was a good person who didn’t deserve to be so unnecessarily burdened by the pettiness of people with nothing better to do than make up and spread spiteful stories.

"Not as much as you seem to think," Felicity told him, her voice gentle as she held his gaze only a moment. But she went on again before he could try to press her more. "I've got a few more things to try to find Deadshot, but I can’t do them here. Can you take over the comms?"

"Sure," John agreed readily, as was expected of him.

He knew she was using that expectation to make herself an exit from the unfinished conversation. But if he’d learned anything in the weeks of working with this woman, it was that she was as smart as she was stubborn. She wouldn’t be tricked into sharing, and she wouldn’t share before she was ready to.

“Arrow,” Felicity said into the comms then. “I’m going to head home early tonight, Freelancer’s
taking over… Right… Yeah, you too. Good night.” Then she turned to take the Bluetooth out of her ear and quickly handed it to him.

“Let me know what I can do to help,” he told her as he accepted the device and just as quickly put it in his own ear. Even though their vigilante wasn’t supposed to get into trouble tonight, he was quite capable of finding it even when he shouldn’t. "And get some sleep. You wanta be well-rested for the opening, and we start your self-defense training the day after that."

The blonde's nose wrinkled a little at the idea, likely more the training than the club opening. Her interesting sparring session with the archer hadn't seemed to make their I.T girl any more eager to start 'basic' self-defense with the former soldier. Really, John was pretty sure she knew she'd revealed too much of her Xena-like abilities, because she'd gotten too quiet about all of it. Even now she was keeping quiet as she got ready to go.

All of it, though, would still have to stay on the backburner until the problem of the Bertinelli bitch was solved. So John didn't say anything more as he un-muted the comms. (He wasn't willing to waste time needing to do that later just because the vigilante might not like the sound of his breathing.)

Though John did, of course, watch Felicity while she walked out—via the now fully operational security system that covered every possible angle both inside the club and out. He wasn't surprised when one of the bouncer's was quick to walk her out to her car. He'd made a point of the back alley and the employee parking lot both being under their watch just as much as the main entrance, V.I.P section, dance floor and the bar.

Though Matt was lucky the vigilante wasn't here to see him trying to flirt with Felicity, who was too nice to just shoot him down. No one hired to work at Verdant was on the List, though those names weren't all corrupt rick people. That was part of the background check for all employees, and Merlyn had kept using the computer system Oliver had setup—courtesy of Felicity—so they could be sure about that. But the bouncer would've probably been doomed to a terrorizing meeting with the Hood anyway, even though all he'd done was win one of Felicity's polite smile as he helped her into her car...

If asked, said vigilante would probably be more than willing to redirect his attention from the futile search for Helena Bertinelli to what was troubling his girlfriend.

His bodyguard and vigilante-partner would have preferred to keep the focus on their I.T girl, too. But the return of this particular—psycho—ex had the potential to become a real disaster all too easily.
So far, Felicity had said all the right things, she was good at that. And she clearly didn’t want either of them to interfere in her real world job, no matter how much it was Oliver’s fault or how easily he could help. Ignoring her wishes wouldn’t help, there could soon come a time when that would have to change. It might be sooner than Felicity herself liked, once Oliver realized her being tied to him was having a negative impact on her career in his family’s company.

But right now they should stay focused on the woman that a part of John still wished Oliver Queen hadn’t been quite fast enough to save a couple of months ago. Unfortunately, in this case, the archer was very, very fast and plenty chivalrous enough for that pretty face to make all the difference.

Felicity Smoak, at least, they could be sure didn’t need to be feared. Feared for and respected, of course, but the odds of her trying to start a gang war or something equally insane were a great deal lower than they were for Helena Bertinelli.

For all they knew, the Huntress might decided to just try and blow up the whole courthouse while her father was inside—it wasn’t like she gave a damn about civilian casualties or any other kind of collateral damage that shouldn’t be written off by anyone.

Then again, the bitch might just as easily put a call into the Major Case Squad’s vigilante task force, promising the identity of the Hood in exchange for her father’s murder. That the D.A and the S.C.P.D couldn’t legally accept such an exchange under any circumstances was neither here or there. If she made that call, it’d be all the proof they’d need about her knowing that information. Then the Vigilante Taskforce would have to go after the ex-mob princess all the harder just because she’d have to be easier to catch than the Hood had been thus far.

If she told Detective Lance he was right, and that the Hood really was Oliver Queen, all of this would be over. John Diggle would definitely go down with him at this point, and Felicity Smoak might, too. Oliver’s family would lose him again, if not to prison then to those that wanted revenge on the vigilante or just wanted him to not be a problem in the future.

And whatever the hell was going on in Starling City, pitting some of the city’s leading lights against each other and getting others kidnapped right out of their own office buildings would remain a mystery. One that none of them would be able to put any effort into solving. So Walter Steele would remain missing and presumed dead. And any hope of trying to help their home become a better place to live again through vigilantism would be all but impossible…

So they had to find Helena Bertinelli.
And John Diggle had to hope that Oliver would be able to aim that arrow straight when he had to let it fly.

Deadshot, *Queen Consolidated*, and all the secrets of Felicity Smoak could wait. For now.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we're slowly but surely making it towards the action. Really. This night can't go on TOO much longer... hope it hasn't been too uninteresting for everyone. Thanks to everyone's well wishes on my vacation. Regarding the scene I posted before that, with Felicity's P.O.V leading up to the sparring, it will probably be revised, but I've decided to keep going with the story for now. I will, of course, let you know if I do go back and change it, but I'd like to get more of Bloody Secrets out for now. And, really, I'm almost to the point where I have a bunch of scenes stored up and ready to go, so the wait shouldn't be too long anymore. Comments and suggestions are always welcome. Thanks for reading, and more to come soon! :-D
Chapter Notes

I'm really beyond tired of terrorist attacks, but since I'm updating again so soon after another one I should say: Best wishes to everyone in Brussels. May those who were lost rest in peace. A swift recovery to everyone that was hurt. Sincere condolences to everyone who may have lost someone and to everyone that felt even a moment of fear. My heart goes out to you all, even as I hope for a better tomorrow, or at least a distant future when these kinds of things don't happen because everyone knows they shouldn't...
But if you're reading this you're here for the more optimistic escape that is fan fiction, so let's get back to that.
Two updates in the same week! See, I am starting to pick up the pace a bit. Not sure this bit of introspection will make anyone much happier than the last one, but both scenes are here for a reason, so I thank you all for bearing with me. More action to come... soon.
Until then, enjoy the thoughts, implications and foreshadowing?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity scowled as yet another search came up empty.

At least she'd thought to mute all but the most imperative of alerts already. The blaring sound that typically harassed her into looking at whatever the program had found wasn't necessary when she was sitting in front of the computer and actively working the problem. It was only an added aggravation with each failure. Though there were some things that bore that alarming sound.

She really should be asleep right now. She was immortal, but shadows would still start to form under her eyes if she went too long without a good night's rest every once and a while. It just took a lot longer for her than most. It wasn't in her, though, to give up before every option had been exhausted. Not when she knew how much this meant to her friend. Even though that same friend would be sure to notice if dark circles did start to appear under her eyes, though her glasses and eye-shadow should hide them for a time.

Not that she was still trying to find Deadshot, per say, anymore than she was monitoring the activities at Merlyn Global Group directly from her home. She wasn't.
The programs running twenty-four-seven at the Foundry could handle all of that, and she'd set them up to notify her of anything they did find, just like all her other 'vigilante programs.' She'd receive the same update Oliver and Digg would, and whoever was at the Foundry would be able to easily access it there. Neither one of the men were incompetent enough with computers to worry about in that regard: after all, the laptop the archer had brought her had been destroyed by bullets not a latte like he'd said. The same programs kept track of the S.C.P.D's investigations, so she didn't have to.

All together it wasn't quite as comprehensive and sophisticated as the whole slew of systems she had trying to keep track of Immortals and Watchers alike, all around the world, but it didn't need to be. Many of the new programs she'd designed for the Starling City vigilante's mission were certainly based on programs she'd already created, and in some cases—like when Floyd Lawton was getting away—she still borrowed from her 'Immortals network,' as Methos had dubbed it. But all of that wasn't what was needed in her home here, wasn't what her team needed or what Oliver needed. Anything outside of Starling wasn't really necessary, so her programs here only needed to monitor the one city.

Except for the ones hunting for Floyd Lawton, of course. Unsuccessfully, still.

What she was researching in her spare time, now, was the murder of Diggle's brother, Andy.

Andrew Diggle Senior had been shot by the sniper Floyd Lawton two years ago. He'd served in the military, like his brother, before becoming a bodyguard here in Starling City, which was where he died. Felicity had known all of that the first night she'd run a very general search on him. What didn't make sense to her even then was how little information she'd found.

The relatively sparse information on his death was one thing. It was immediately ruled a homicide, which made sense since a sniper's gunshot couldn't really be anything else. Thanks to ARGUS, it was only a few weeks later that the S.C.P.D was able to identify the killer. Courtesy of the curare laced bullets Deadshot was known for almost as much as his accuracy. It seemed Floyd Lawton's second career had only started just then, his infamous international reputation starting with that murder. That homicide that the police, Interpol and ARGUS all noted was probably 'Deadshot's only miss to date,' because an assassin of his caliber wouldn't be hired to kill a mere bodyguard. Therefore the actual target was 'probably the man he was protecting.'

That assumption was wrong.

Felicity knew that even before she'd finished reading those short reports. But it also meant that the case wasn't being actively investigated by anyone. Yes, Andrew Diggle Senior was dead, and murdered, but he was just one of many victims. His homicide wasn't closed, because the killer was never caught, but his was just the first name on the list of kills known to be the responsibility of a
professional assassin. And unlike a great number of the other names on that same list, Andy Diggle wasn't a priority for anyone outside of the small family that lost him. His brother, widow and son. If not for the fact that he was Deadshot's first kill, his name wouldn't even be noted by half the global organizations that kept track of the murders made by one of the world's best assassins.

Or one of world's 'best' known assassins, anyway.

Deadshot was much more showy than anyone in the League of Assassins tended to be, unless expressly ordered. His murders were meant to be seen and recognized. Three bullets in the chest, laced with curare to make sure the target shouldn't survive.

Malcolm Merlyn did, because he was wearing a bulletproof vest and Oliver knew they needed to counter the curare right away. None of Deadshot previous targets had been so lucky.

Deadshot didn't miss. Even if he did fire only once that first time. And if that first shot had been a miss, he would've fired more bullets until one found the man he had been hired to kill.

So Andy Diggle was a target. The target. Not a miss like far too many had assumed. Like even his brother still assumed.

It'd be one thing if he was hit by a stray bullet and his client was killed, or at least hit, too. But only the one shot was fired. Not the tree that Deadshot usually killed with, true, but the only curare laced bullet fired that day was meant for Andy Diggle.

Felicity had read the coroner's report, and while something about it hadn't rung quite true to her—she couldn't put her finger on what yet but she knew something was off—the analysis of the corpse was straightforward enough. It wasn't the curare that'd killed him, he'd been shot dead by the one bullet fired from the sniper's gun that day.

The first bullet of that notable signature to appear, yes. Attributed to being different from all the others that'd received a trio of shots to the chest because it was his first hit. Dead shot, square in the chest: thus the name, and the signature that anyone who paid attention to such things should recognize thereafter.

Why though, was Digg's brother the target that night?
And why were so many professional investigators willing to just let it go with an obviously false conclusion. While he hadn't worked in law enforcement, Andy Diggle had been a former soldier. That was something many policemen would draw kinship to if they didn't have a significant reason not to.

Never mind the fact that it was just as hard to research Digg's brother as it was to find the man that'd killed him. He'd been a ghost in the technological sense even before he'd died.

Yes, he'd served in the military.

Yes, he'd become a bodyguard here in Starling City while his brother was returning to the Middle East for his third tour there post-divorce.

But other than his marriage, the birth of his son and a few guard jobs here and there, Andy Diggle might as well have not existed.

The gaps in between the few brief protection details he took on had been significant, some of them covering years. And though the years sometimes seemed to fly by, in the computer age there should be many more records for her to find of him.

Unless he’d been erased, and by someone who knew what they were doing at that. Someone who knew how to make sure the information wasn't there to be found anymore. Like she did when an Immortal screwed up enough under one of their aliases to necessitate that lifetime being completely wiped away. Usually she helped in the forging of new identities in this age more than the destruction of them, but sometimes the screw ups really were that bad. There were a few independent hackers other than herself who were capable of that, when they were inspired, but the ones that typically did it usually worked for whoever needed it done.

Government agencies and espionage were the two biggest groups that fit that category, but some criminal organization could, too. Including assassins.

Whichever one it might be, if someone was scrubbing his identity down to near non-existence before he was killed though, Andy Diggle wasn’t a mere definitely a bodyguard. What was he then? Why was he practically invisible between his military service and the start of his second career? Why had it gotten him killed?

No matter what avenue Felicity had tried thus far, however, the answers had continued to elude
No matter what web she tried. Deep, dark, dark and deep—it didn’t matter. Even she couldn’t find it if it wasn’t there to be found.

Leaving her with only the options of last resort.

The ones she didn’t like to take.

It was a relief, at least, to now be sure that Deadshot wasn’t one of Mazin’s men. That the League of Assassins hadn’t been here, assassinating in Starling City, while she called it home. That her deadliest student hadn’t broken his word in that regard, too. So at least she only had to demand answers for the presence of Malcolm Merlyn. A call she still hadn’t made.

Because she couldn’t be sure that there wasn’t more going on than she knew. While a few reasons Malcolm Merlyn might be here with Ra’s al Ghul’s blessing came to mind all too easily, some of the reasons she didn’t like.

One of those un-liked reasons, however, would be a good thing if it meant her former student was still her friend. It would be just like the deadly man that’d asked her to teach him her wisdom, and eventually become just as over protective as every other man she knew. But Malcolm Merlyn had been here years before her, so his placement couldn’t have much to do with her.

What’s more, the ’Dark Archer’s’ own actions wouldn’t bear that reason out. It wouldn’t make sense for a League member placed in her home to protect her to draw attention to themselves. Calling the vigilante out like he did a few months ago had been done very publically, even if his face and form were never seen by anyone other than the hostages and the vigilante.

That sort of theatricality wasn’t a weapon the League didn’t know how to wield, of course, she’d taught Mazin the value of drama herself. It was a lesson he’d learned well.

But the Starling City vigilante had been no threat to her. He’d been targeting criminals and corrupt businessmen. Not I.T girls.

As far as she knew, the only woman Oliver had ever even fought was the Triad hit-woman Chien Na-Wei, and he’d practically run away from their last fight at Merlyn Global. Then again, there was more than a problem or two inherent there if the Chinese woman was anything like her teacher. Who, thus far, hadn’t raised the League’s ire by breaking any of their unofficial rules.
Still, the exposure back before Christmas didn't make sense if Tommy's father was here on a mission. And if Malcolm Merlyn somehow wasn't the darkly armored archer that Oliver had fought—seeing as it was a description that fit most of the League—then he should have reported it. Either way, Felicitas should have heard from Mazin by now.

Unless he'd gone dark. A description they'd borrowed from Star Wars, which didn't make the idea of Dark Quickenings any less terrifying for her. The duels of The Game were bad enough on their own, but the idea that the madness and outright evil of someone could come with their Quickening and corrupt you sometimes made death sound like a better alternative... Better than becoming what you fought to destroy. Better than turning on your friends.

Or a friend turning on you...

That, however, was something Felicitas couldn't ask about from afar. It was a question that had to be asked and answered in person. With the Buzz of their Quickenings telling the truth even if tongues did not. If it'd happened it couldn't easily be undone, even if Methos had managed to save the Highlander from it once. Either way, she wouldn't know if it'd happened until the next time their eyes met.

Should she call for a different explanation entirely though? Because there was something she was missing here, something she couldn’t find on her own, because whatever organization Andy Diggle had gotten involved in clearly didn’t make use of such ‘open’ markets—of even the less open ones—on the worldwide web.

Like the League of Assassins.

The death of Digg’s brother shouldn’t have been their doing, because Mazin had been well aware of where she called home for all but a few short parts of his lifetime. She’d been in Starling City for several years now, including when Andy Diggle was killed. So by the rules Ra’s al Ghul personally determined for his League, this city was off limits in that time frame. At least without first receiving her permission.

The League was willing to kill Immortals, of course. Usually headhunters who became too bold or too careless. But not Immortals their leader called friends, let alone family.

Then again, Mazin had made exceptions for Felicitas in the past. Sending assassins when a headhunter with more skill than her student was comfortable with got too close to her. He was as protective as just about every other man in her life, even though he’d never really managed to best her before. He’d always asked first though, unwilling to offend her and risk invoking her own
teacher’s wrath.

Once upon a time Methos had very pointedly told Mazin to keep ‘his game’ away from Felicitas unless it involved intervening if someone broke the unofficial—but by now kind of official—rules of the The Game. Mazin hadn’t ever forgotten any warning the man the world had called Death had given him. Though he was happy to call Felicitas his sister and friend, the other Immortal she called brother had never made any attempt to not intimidate him, so there was still a sense of self-preservation in his respect for Methos.

Any actual breaches in the damn Game hadn’t happened in centuries, until the incidents the younger Highlander had reacted to. As the headhunters involved were all targeting Duncan MacLeod himself, the League had simply watched him handle them. Mazin’s warriors had been exceedingly thorough, however, since the League’s inception, with making sure no one’s head got too big in The Game. Even if unofficially governing The Game was only one of the reasons that Ra’s al Ghul claimed to have created his League of Assassins. Beneath both maintaining his authority over the League and, supposedly, trying to end The Game once and for all... something so many of them had been trying to do for millennia without success.

Granted, if Mazin was trying to be sneaky about it he might've thought sending a sniper would throw her off. Make her think he was an assassin who wasn't affiliated with the League. Deadshot didn’t wield swords, likely didn’t even understand why so many high-caliber assassins still did. So allowing him to kill anywhere near her even if the target wasn’t another Immortal or Pre-Immortal might not be a violation of that rule in some regards... but Felicitas had never known the League to put out hits on anyone. They were almost all of them assassins, if Ra’s al Ghul wanted someone dead, for profit or any other reason; he sent one of his own warriors. Or, occasionally, he went himself.

But who else in that sort of sphere could’ve hired Deadshot? And more importantly, as it could lead to the first answer: why?

She wasn't going to find anything more this way. If it was on the web, she would've found some trace of it by now. She'd been searching for over a week already, and it'd been days since she'd found anything new. She could continue to leave her search algorithms running, of course, could wait to hear back from any of the message boards the cyber division of many law enforcement agencies would never find unless a highly skilled hacker showed them where to look.

But... it felt wrong to just wait. Especially when that waiting could lead to nothing still. Especially when there was another option.

In this day and age, waiting seemed to be a thing of the past. Everything happened so fast, it seemed to be a necessary part of adaption to move fast, too. And this was life or death. One that’d
already happened, but maybe more if her fears were reality.

Felicity sighed, finally opening the top drawer of her desk and pulling the cell phone she never used out of the charger it was always connected to. After going through each setting that would keep someone else from being able to open this phone; two ridiculously long passwords, her fingerprints from her right thumb and left index finger, and finally an optical scan of her right eye, the security protocol deactivated, at least momentarily. She'd wondered more than once, though she'd never actually needed to use this phone for the reason it was provided, how she was supposed to do so quickly with so many road blocks in the way. But then she'd never actually needed it, and didn't personally need it now.

She opened the list of contacts, all nameless, and scrolled past all the people who couldn't hope to help her with this, deliberately skipping over Methos because while he might be able to help he wouldn't want her to keep looking into something like this at all. When she reached the last number, she didn't let herself hesitate before she pressed the 'call' button and then brought the device up to her ear.

It rang only once before it was answered without a greeting.

Felicity didn't hesitate, she simply started speaking in Latin as she was expected to, "I need information. Now."

Each word was carefully chosen even though she was sure every communication device Methos had provided for her over the years—probably by way of the organization she was currently calling—was as secure as it could be. There was no reason to waste words here, and while her student might've merely been following her teacher's lead, Methos wouldn't have insisted on strict guidelines for the communication methods without a good reason. Even if that reason was mostly healthy paranoia.

"Apologies, most honored one," the 'operator' answered immediately, his Latin a little rougher than her own as he likely hadn't ever had to speak it regularly, but even through the electronic disguising of his voice the respect was clear. At least that still hadn't changed. "The great one is not available at this time. Are you in danger?"

"No," Felicity hesitated a moment, then repeated; "I need information."

"How may this one be of assistance?" the reply was again immediate, as expected.
She hesitated only a moment more, then decided to go with the safest option. The only question she knew she could ask, even if it might confuse her student whether he was still himself or not. "There was an incident near my home. In April of 2010. I need to know why it happened."

"This one does not—"

"I know you couldn't tell me by phone even if you knew the answer," Felicity cut him off. "Send someone."

"Understood, most honored one."

"Thank you," she replied, before hanging up.

Felicity had considered trying to say something along the lines of 'don't tell anyone else' to see if that might keep Mazin from contacting Methos about it, but that was actually more likely to have the opposite effect.

Better known as the Demon’s Head these days or not, if he was still himself, her most dangerous student took after her own mentor in the most exasperating of ways. That the pair could find common ground wasn’t a bad thing of course—but why did that commonality have to be protecting her when she didn’t need protecting?

So Felicity set the phone back in its permanent charging place, closed said drawer without watching to see if the encryption protocols came into effect because she didn’t need to.

Then, at last, she could go to bed for at least a few short hours until the sun rose on a new day.

Chapter End Notes

Well, technically this isn't the same night... Well, actually it was almost 1AM when she left the Foundry, wasn't it? Well, AM is morning. Technically. It's part of the next day.
So we're there at least. In the same day as the club opening.
That's not the next scene, because my muses are very talkative lately, but the next dialogue should still be pretty interesting. And this one wasn't half bad, was it? A few of you had been asking when we might be seeing the League, and I did say it wouldn't
be too long, right?
Maybe that call was a bit over the top. Maybe I shouldn't have watched some of Arya's
GOT scenes on YouTube before I wrote it, which may tell you how long ago I wrote
that part of this scene... but it works. I think.
And the changing identities thing really is tied back to my idea of how Immortals
would have to live; even if Duncan never seemed to change his name... Then again,
that COULD be why it was so easy for everyone to find him. The weekly headhunters,
Watchers, etc. I know that's the dramatic backbone of the show, but they really
could've had him go by different names a few times in the past...
Sorry if all of this still seems to be building pretty slowly. It kind of is, I guess, but
we'll be getting to more action soon enough. Hopefully with everything continue to
make sense along the way.
Ideas, constructive criticism, etc., are always welcome! :-}
Chapter 13

Tommy Merlyn's P.O.V.

Tommy breathed a sigh of relief when he finally finished the checklist in his head of everything that should already be done for the club to be completely ready for tonight. With just a few hours to spare, everything was as ready as it could be. As long as no one set the building on fire again and the famous DJ showed up, Verdant's opening night should be everything everyone was expecting it to be.

Well, everyone except Tommy himself, that is. Because the club was never really about doing something fun that resembled responsible with his childhood friend. And it wasn't really about making money instead of just spending it.

At least it clearly wasn't for Oliver. Whom he hadn't seen since that terrible night at the hospital.

Tommy had seen more of his former friend's bodyguard recently than the owner of this new nightclub himself. Because of some psycho ex—who, from the sounds of it, just might set the club on fire again, according to the bodyguard.

And it was hard not to take the imposing ex-soldier seriously. Even though none of all the many, many women they had met through the years had ever struck him as particularly dangerous. But Tommy had been Ollie's wingman as often as he'd returned the favor, and the blur of women his friend had dated over the years had been just that. A blur.

No one particularly memorable. Other than Laurel, of course. And he was fairly sure his own girlfriend couldn't be the 'psycho ex' Mister Diggle was worried about.

There was the bubbly blonde he'd brought to Tommy's birthday party, too. But somehow he couldn't imagine she was the crazy one, either. The girl he remembered meeting that night would've been memorable for her smiles and easy laughter alone, but how important she'd seemed to Oliver was what made him hope his friend hadn't screwed that up already. Even if they weren't friends anymore.

It had almost felt like he'd gotten the real Oliver Queen back for that birthday. Only a slightly more
serious, maybe more grown up version. The version that no one thought they'd ever see after the *Queen's Gambit* was lost at sea.

It was, at the same time, an unbelievably huge change from the Ollie of before. He'd always had that focus, though he hadn't always wanted to use it. Except with women: with women Ollie had made seduction look so easy that sometimes even Tommy was jealous. But only very rarely was he interested in anyone afterwards.

Like Laurel.

But the woman the bodyguard was worried about couldn't be Laurel or the bubbly blonde...

Felicity, that was her name. And when Missus Q had asked about her, the imposing bodyguard had even known her name, hadn't he? So it couldn't be her that a bodyguard—and by extension every one of *Verdant's* bouncers—should be worried about tonight.

The ex-soldier had been very serious about it though, so the former playboy tried to think some more. He couldn't think of any other woman, though. Other than Laurel or Felicity, no one else in the blur of women from before had ever made much of a lasting impression on Oliver, let alone on his (now former) best friend.

Well, there was that one woman Ollie had knocked up, wasn't there? Sandra or Samantha something? But after she'd lost the baby Tommy had never seen any reason to even try to meet her... and that was even farther back...

It'd taken a lot of very specific reminders from Mister Diggle, regarding the when and where, for Tommy to even vaguely remember the woman. Apparently she was the one Ollie had been on a date with that he and Laurel had unintentionally crashed. When he and Laurel couldn't get a table, she'd asked Ollie for help, and then asked about the job Tommy hadn't been able to make himself say anything about before that.

Admittedly, Tommy had been more focused on being furious at Laurel and jealous of Ollie than anything else. The other woman that was there that night hadn't even been a blip on his radar. He'd had to ask Laurel what her name was before he'd gone to talk to Oliver about the job thing. When he'd had to make himself fess up shortly afterwards about his dad cutting him off. But by then 'Helena' was already out of the picture.
So it wasn't really a surprise that Tommy couldn't remember what she looked like—other than she was a brunette, not a blonde. But that was more tied to his memory of the next girl.

He remembered not knowing what to say when Laurel commented under her breath that he'd switched from brunettes when they saw the blonde on his arm that night. Those sort of comments from Laurel were rare, but proof that she hadn't forgotten how often Oliver had cheated on her. Maybe she kept saying them early on, less and less these days, as a way of telling him she wouldn't accept it from him because she shouldn't have taken it from Oliver. Looking back, after meeting the bubbly blonde, the lawyer would probably feel bad if asked about it, which was why Tommy never would ask her.

But either way, he really didn't know what to do with Mister Diggle's warnings about Oliver's psycho ex being back in town, other than agreeing he could tell the club security whatever he wanted.

Tommy didn't think he'd ever had a bodyguard who actually commented on his love-life, but then Mister Diggle seemed to fit more into the friend category for Oliver than Tommy himself did—he'd actually been down into the basement before, which may or may not be where Oliver was hiding these days. Because Oliver, himself, Tommy hadn't seen since that night at the hospital. Not that he wanted to.

Still, the steady, high flow of power going into whatever was under the club told Tommy that what was really important to his lying best friend was down there. Not up here. That basement that was in the blueprints of the old steel factory but not the plans for the new night club, was where the electricity had been going even before construction crews started spending a few hours a day up here—more hours once Tommy had taken over as general manager. He probably should've asked what was down there, but somehow it'd never come up.

He'd never tried to open that door. That door with its own security system that Oliver had led him away from the few times he'd caught him by it, whether he was going out or coming in at the time.

After everything Tommy had learned, everything he couldn't remotely wrap his head around—his coldhearted father killing people as easily as he might fire a father of five; or his brother, back from the dead but shooting arrows at people—after all of that, he probably shouldn't be looking at that door.

This door. Yet somehow Tommy still found himself standing here, contemplating it. Staring at the security pad that kept it locked.
Only for a minute though. Then the door opened.

And Tommy jerked back, suddenly remembering that he'd been relieved by the fact that Oliver was avoiding him, that he wasn't at all ready to have this conversation with him. Or any conversation with the man he'd mourned for five years and then never really gotten back.

But the blonde head that popped out was several inches closer to the ground than the vigilante's. Oliver's hair was a lot shorter; his admittedly buff form not anywhere near as curvy. And he was pretty sure he'd never seen Oliver wearing that shade of pink, so for a minute Tommy could only stare at the smiling, bespectacled face.

"Hi," the girl greeted him cheerfully. "Were you coming down? You should come down," she grabbed his wrist without waiting for an answer, yanking him through the doorway so she could close the door.

The little thing was a lot stronger than she looked: if not for her fingers around his wrist still holding on, Tommy might've gone straight down the stairs, headfirst, whether he wanted to or not.

"Sorry," the blonde went on as she let him go once he was standing on the other side of the door she was closing. "We're not really supposed to stand there. Draws too much attention, or it might, something like that. You know, once the club opens. But there's still workers working right now, so..."

Tommy wasn't sure why he was following the woman down the staircase his face had almost known much too intimately, but he was mostly focused on trying to figure out where he knew her from. Because maybe if he knew that, he'd have a shot at figuring out what she was doing popping out of Oliver's not-so-well-hidden hideout.

"I tried to tell Oliver that that door was stupid," the woman went on emphatically. "That it should really be a secret—as in hidden—door. Maybe in a rarely used pantry, or where you keep the really pricey stuff. Behind a secret wall wouldn't be a bad idea, either. But it was done this way before he let you take-over the club, and he didn't want to stomp on your toes, I guess," She smiled up at him again as she dropped gracefully into the computer chair that was set up for what was obviously a workstation of some kind, right in the middle of the large basement. "So? What do you think?" she made an all-encompassing gesture at the room around them with the hands sporting green manicure.

Tommy glanced between her, the computers behind her, all the exercise equipment beyond, and all the green arrows displayed around the room like decorations designed to make Detective Lance's
job easy if he ever got a warrant for this place. Then he shook his head. "What the hell is this?" he demanded flatly.

The woman rolled her eyes, "You already know that, Tommy."

And suddenly Tommy recognized her. Though he didn't think he'd ever seen her make that eye movement it did bring his attention to her pretty eyes for a moment, which he remembered without glasses in front of them. "You're... You're that girl that Ollie brought to my birthday party... Felicity?"

"Um-hum. Felicity Smoak," she confirmed with a nod that had her ponytail bouncing. "Thank you, again, for the cake, by the way. It was delicious."

Tommy stared at her, picturing her pretty face without her glasses and all that long blonde hair a tumble of artsy curls around her face instead of a tight ponytail. "You're welcome?" then he blinked. "Wait... Why are you here?"

"I'm working," she responded just as easily, gesturing to the computers as if to remind him of exactly what her expertise was as *Queen Consolidated*.

But this wasn't *Queen Consolidated*. This was the vigilante's secret-lair underneath their new nightclub—it couldn't be anything but now that Tommy was down here. And even though all the looks he and Laurel had both seen Ollie send this girl's way a few weeks ago didn't quite translate to how the hell a girl he'd only just met since his return to Starling was worthy of such trust if his childhood friends and family weren't.

Tommy shook his head, trying to swallow the bitterness that was starting to claw up his throat again. The girl he was talking to, after all, hadn't done anything to deserve it. "Where's Oliver?" he asked her, wincing a little as the words came out too sharply anyway.

The blonde seemed unfazed by it. "Also working," she shrugged.

Tommy frowned. "He doesn't work."

What he meant was Oliver didn't have a job: didn't need one. And since Tommy had found out the truth, his friend had given up even the pretense of actually caring about the club coming together
over their heads. Which, while convenient in the avoiding-talking-area, did make some of those jealousy-like feelings Tommy wasn't used to feeling before his father cut him off rear their head a little bit.

But what he'd said got him a look that somehow made him feel like a misbehaving two-year-old. "That's a hell of a judgment to make about a friend you got back from the dead after mourning him for half a decade," she commented.

Tommy scowled, his temper finally flaring and making him break in, "Hey, you don't know—"

But the blonde cut him off, "And now you hate him for...what?" she shook her head, golden ponytail twitching from side to side like an agitated cat's tail. "Saving your dad's life? Saving your life? Saving Laurel's life?"

"No, he—"

"Or maybe it's just that he wanted to keep the people he really cares about, yourself included, as far away from all of this as he could?" She raised an eyebrow as that made him pause, but didn't stop. "Or is it just that he changed from the boy you lost to a man that could survive everything that he's been through?"

"No!" Tommy shook his head quickly. "That's not—he lied to me! To everybody! He's been lying all this time..." he trailed off, trying not to shrink under her wilting stare.

"And what, exactly, was he supposed to tell you, Tommy? When?" she asked, sounding so calmly matter-of-fact that they might have been discussing whether or not there were clouds in the sky outside. She spread her arms wide, in another all-encompassing gesture at all that was around them. "How? Should he have given you the tour down here when he first started talking about a club? Or did you really want to know that the first people he'd had to kill since coming back were the guys that kidnapped you two? Would it make you feel better if I reminded you that those guys were the bad guys?"

Tommy frowned, not liking the feeling of being lectured like a little kid who'd asked why he couldn't jump off the third story balcony into the backyard pool. He only tried to do that once, but somehow he felt the same way in front of Felicity Smoak that he had been when Raisa had been yelling at him half in English and half in Russian that day. "I know, they—"
She cut him off again. "That they'd killed some innocent bystander just for being in the same alley as your car when they kidnapped you? Or do you need to be told that your friend let them torture him a bit before he fought back?"

"What? No!" Tommy blinked at her, horrified as he remembered some of the scary-looking devices he'd seen the S.C.P.D lab guys bringing out in bags just like the kidnappers' bodies that day. Before they were loaded into a cop car and driven to Queen Mansion, with Detectives Lance and Hilton not far behind them.

The woman was still talking though. "Or that that wasn't the first time he's had to kill? Or the first time he was tortured?"

"No!" Tommy cried, completely aghast.

But the blonde kept going like she hadn't heard him, the voice that'd been soft, friendly and bright when she'd been Oliver's smiling date to his birthday dinner was now a distant memory barely anything like to the analytical, no-nonsense hardness that was accompanying her frown. "Judging by his scars, actually, I'd say there were more than a few times. That he was tortured, I mean. Though some of those wounds could have killed him, so that was probably the goal more than outright torture those times. Dead men don't usually tell tales, after all."

"St-Stop it," Tommy tried to say it firmly, but his voice broke right away, like it had back when he was a boy just becoming a man. He didn't let himself back away or cover his ears, though the urge was strong, because a part of him felt like he almost had to hear this. Though exactly why the words were coming from Oliver's maybe-girlfriend wasn't something he knew the answer to either.

"Why?" she kept pressing on, cocking her head to the side in a gently curious gesture that was at odds with her relentless words. "Is it that much easier alone in your own thoughts? Hating him for... again: what, exactly?"

Tommy kept shaking his head, waving his hands helplessly at his sides for a moment before a reply found its way out. "He wasn't going to tell me. Ever. He said that." His hands finally fell to hang at his sides as he shoulders sagged.

"Humph," Felicity raised an eyebrow. "And that's a problem because you feel so wonderful now that you do know?"
Tommy blinked at her, then swallowed. "What?"

"You feel better, knowing that some psychopath beat Oliver half to death a few months ago? That saving half a dozen hostages that night of the Queen Christmas Party was what put him in the hospital, not a crazy motorcycle accident after a fight with his sister?"

Tommy shook his head, trying to think of a better reply, but she went on again before he could.

"Or do you feel better knowing that Moira Queen was never in any real danger the night the vigilante visited her? When she shot him?"

"She—Why did he—"

"Or that Laurel wasn't ever in any danger from him, either, because she's one of the people that Oliver would never hurt? Since you know he'd put an arrow in himself before he'd hurt her?" the blonde shook her head. "Though, again, it wasn't too long ago that he had to go all-out to save her life, was it?"

Tommy's eyes slammed shut, trying to keep out the image that recorded threat had painted for the vigilante. For Oliver. When Laurel let her job get her in over her head with someone who'd made even her hard-as-nails cop father paler than a piece of paper.

That voice still haunted his nightmares sometimes. 'Make sure this message finds its way to The Vigilante. Do it fast. Because at sunrise I'm going to leave pieces of this girl all over Starling City unless he pays me a little visit. You know, gives us a chance to get to know each other better...'

Remembering that night sometimes made him wish that the vigilante—that Oliver—hadn't made an exception and let that bastard live. Even though Laurel and her father were there... though that was probably why he'd done it. And he probably wasn't wrong.

"Stop it, please," Tommy pleaded, but again she ignored him.

"He took on a criminal mastermind's private army, without the element of surprise, to save her life. Just like he took on the Triad—the Chinese mob to save your father. And you, since you were there." Felicity paused a moment, then splayed her hands as if looking for answers herself. "And you hate him because he might not have chosen to tell you if there was any other way to save your
"Stop it!" Tommy finally shouted, turning to slam his hands into the metal surface of a nearby table.

It didn't give at all, and his palms didn't appreciate it. But at least this woman he'd only just met last week finally stopped talking.

He took a deep breath, then made himself turn to meet her calm gaze; his miniature tantrum hadn't fazed her at all either. "I don't hate him," he told her, then watched as she nodded, her ponytail bobbing with the motion.

"Good. That's a start."

Tommy blinked. "A start to what?" He asked bitterly. "Our friendship's obviously over."

"And that's what you're really so angry about, isn't it?" her smile was gentle now, and it looked a lot more natural on her face then the unforgiving frown of a few moments ago. "But it doesn't have to be. Not if you don't want it to be. Do you?"

Tommy shook his head again even as he said, "He doesn't trust me."

"I'm not sure how much he trusts anybody." She answered softly. "Fighting for your life. Surviving torture. Killing. Those types of things don't exactly lend themselves to trusting anyone."

"He's killed people," Tommy focused on that. He had to focus on that. "How can I—How can you—trust him?"

Felicity gazed steadily back at him for a long moment, then told him, "He saved my life, too, you know." Her hand came up to her neck, emerald green nails flashing over pale skin. "Do you remember seeing the Dodger in the news a few weeks ago?"

Tommy blinked, but nodded almost at the same time. "Wasn't he a thief?" he asked; segwayed, but the desire for any answers at all kept his mouth moving.
"Um-hum. A hostage-taking jewel thief, specifically," Felicity looked away as she went on. "I showed Oliver that news report. Told him that that was the sort of thing he should stop. He agreed. Well," she amended lightly. "He said he'd make an exception."

"To go after a thief who wasn't white-collar?" Tommy questioned, not sure why he sounded so snide as he asked it.

"To stop a criminal that used hostages to get what he wanted." The blonde clarified, emerald-nailed fingers still moving around her neck. "He'd put bomb collars around their necks. And, if they didn't do what he wanted—boom!" She threw her hands wide from where they'd been framing her neck like she was talking about some sort of special effect in a movie, but the way she flinched as she did it made what she was talking about all too real. "He got away from the police. He had to use one of his collars like a grenade to get away from the vigilante that first time."

"Sounds like a pretty bad guy," Tommy admitted, because anyone who turned people into hostages was bad, and bombs just brought that to another level. A bullet—or an arrow—after all, might take only one unfortunate life. A bomb could kill and hurt who knew how many more.

The girl nodded. "A few months ago he killed a man in Spain. Señior Medina had just returned from volunteering in New England after super-storm Sandy when the Dodger collared him at the airport. When he wasn't willing to walk into the crowd at one of Madrid's best jewelers wearing that bomb, the Dodger blew his head off. Orphaned two little boys and a baby girl that day."

Tommy grimaced, natural horror and outrage at the horrible happening slightly overshadowed by just how close it stabbed to home. To that night he'd woken up to his father in tears and the realization that his mother was never coming home again. "That's awful," he admitted needlessly, but then he frowned. "But if Ollie was after that guy how did he—if you were helping him—how—"

"How did I end up with a bomb collar around my neck?" Felicity shook her head when his eyes widened. "It was my own fault," she sighed. "We set a trap for him. Placed a necklace we knew he'd want at a public auction. A charity for cancer." She grimaced, looking away as she went on. "I saw a man take it, and he wasn't wearing a bomb collar, so I didn't think he was... Well, anyway, turned out the Dodger had decided to do the deed himself that time. But he had a bomb with him, so when I tried to make him put the necklace back," she gestured to her throat, then smiled a little tremulously as her eyes met his again. "Oliver chased him down."

"Killed him?" Tommy clarified, a little surprised to realize even as he said it that the idea didn't bother him so much anymore. Much at all, really. A guy who'd orphaned three little kids and then
threatened this bubbly—if somewhat scary—blonde didn’t deserve his horror.

The secrecy still hurt. At the moment when he'd actually asked if Oliver would've ever told him that he was just pretending to be some damaged version of the boy he’d once been. That there was a lot more truth to that damage than the rest of the lie. That who he was now wasn't at all who he'd been...that still hurt. Especially since it was Oliver.

Tommy had gotten used to being hurt by his father a long time ago, so the idea that he didn't really know the cold man at all—when he'd been barely more than a shadow with a disapproving voice for almost as long as his son could really remember—didn't hurt all that much.

But Oliver... his best friend, his brother in all but blood... Tommy had been able to count on him till that damn storm stole him away. So the idea that he couldn't anymore: couldn't count on him, couldn't trust him... that hurt.

"No," the blonde shook her head slowly this time, and the speculation in her eyes as he looked back at her made Tommy wonder what this stranger that might be his not-best friend's girlfriend saw on his face.

And she almost had to be Ollie's girlfriend, didn't she? How else could she be down here? Why else would Ollie have introduced her to him? To Laurel?

"He could have killed him," she went on matter-of-factly. "It probably would've been easier. It might have been safer, long-term... Maybe even better for, well, almost everybody... But Oliver doesn't just kill people, Tommy."

Even Tommy couldn't quite see how killing the bomb-wielding jewel-thief could be called 'just killing' like it wasn't justified, especially by the woman who'd been unlucky enough to end up wearing one of his bombs around her neck. Or how Oliver could've not killed him. Tommy thought he himself would have; it it'd been Laurel. But he went with it because somehow talking to this almost-stranger was making him feel better word-by-word. And it hinted at something he needed to know. "He doesn't?"

"No," Felicity shook her head yet again. "He gives them the chance to change first. To do the right thing. Every time, if he can." She shrugged. "The Dodger was never going to do that. But Oliver didn't need to kill him to stop him. So I'm glad he didn't."
"You...are?" Tommy blinked, wondering if Laurel might say the same thing.

"Yes."

He stared at her for a second, then cautiously clarified, "You're glad he didn't kill the guy that was gonna blow your head off."

Felicity nodded. "I'm glad that he didn't have to. That he knew that. Recognized that. And didn't decide to kill him anyway." She tilted her head slightly, studying him a second before saying, "You asked how to trust him again. Trust isn't just about who he was is, Tommy. It's about what he does." She cocked her head to the side. "Do you think he had to pull back his hood that night?"

Tommy blinked at her again. "Wh-What?"

"When your father was shot. Did he have to show you who he was?"

"I-I thought he wanted to kill my Dad," Tommy told her, although the thought seemed stupid now, at the time he'd been so scared. "I was pointing a gun at him."

"Do you know how to fire a gun?"

"What?" Tommy frowned. "You point and pull the trigger."

"You have to aim if you want to actually hit anything," Felicity told him mildly. "And sometimes you need to disengage the safety to fire it." She waited a moment. "Do you know how to do either of those things?"

Tommy swallowed slowly, then admitted, "No."

After his mother was murdered by some punk with a gun in the Glades, years ago, he'd never wanted anything to do with guns. When they'd gotten to that part of 'anti-kidnapping training' back in high school, he'd told his father as much. It was one of the few times his father had actually backed down on that kind of argument: instead of haranguing him into completing the course with Oliver if he wanted something or other—whatever the next big thing was back then—his father
had actually said that maybe he was right. Making that night when his father almost died the first time Tommy had ever even held a gun before.

"It's not as easy as they make it look in the movies," the blonde told him mildly. "Even when it's not a friend you're aiming at." She shook her head. "Even if your friend doesn't make escape and evasion look like something he might've learned in pre-school."

Tommy nodded slowly as he realized what she was really saying, "He didn't have to tell me then... he could've just left me there." He swallowed at the thought. "He could've let my Dad die."

"He could have," Felicity agreed, bringing him gaze back to hers. "But he didn't. "She held his eyes a moment longer, then nodded. "If you want to trust him again, if you want your friend back? You have to look at the big picture. At everything he's done. Everything he does. And not just the few incidents the S.C.P.D can't keep from the media."

Tommy swallowed, "How?"

"You could try asking."

"He doesn't want—"

"And please," Felicity cut him off again, "Try not to assume. You'll get as much wrong as you get right. Maybe. And if he doesn't want to talk about some stuff, ask about something else. Anything else." She spread her arms in what looked like a welcoming gesture this time. "Ask me whatever you want. Digg, too. We might tell you to mind your own business sometimes, but none of us will put an arrow in you. Oliver certainly never would."

"I didn't think he'd..." Tommy started, then trailed off with a frown.

When Starling City's infamous vigilante had pulled back his hood to reveal the face of his best friend, Tommy hadn't hesitated to lower the gun he'd had aimed at him. Hadn't even thought about it. Because shooting some scary bow-wielding wacko was one thing—one Tommy wasn't really sure he could've actually done anyway—but shooting Oliver? That he could never even consider doing.

Except, sitting there next to his dying dad (who'd also just killed two guys right in front of him),
and watching as his best friend—who also happened to be that whacko with a bow—raced to save the older man... It was still hard to swallow. To get his head around at all.

Thinking back, though, Tommy had never once thought that he might end up with an arrow in him. Not after he recognized his friend's face. Maybe in those few moments before Oliver pulled back the hood, but the vigilante had also just saved them so even then...

The first reported 'sighting' of the man had been when he'd saved Tommy 'and Oliver.' And then Tommy's dad had cut him off, so money couldn't have brought him back to the vigilante's attention, making the man pretty much a non-issue to him. Until he found out that Laurel was working with the madman. That said madman was Oliver could put that in uncomfortable perspective. Except he'd seen Oliver with the woman who was somehow playing the part of shrink for him here and now.

"That's a good start," said pseudo-shrink's calm voice brought him back out of his thoughts.

When Tommy looked at her he saw she'd spun the chair back towards the monitors: two of which had computer gibberish scrolling steadily down multiple windows, but the screen on the right was full of what looked like old home video footage playing in a bunch of little windows.

It wasn't home videos—mostly it looked like street intersections and some sidewalks—but the image quality was terrible, like it was coming from cameras no one should still be using. Cameras so bad, they had to be older than both of the people watching their results right now. Or trying to.

"What's that?" Tommy tried asking, pointing at the blurry videos more as a distraction than genuine curiosity.

But the blonde ignored his gesture and answered as though he'd been continuing his involuntary psych-analysis. As though he was the one that needed it. "It is a good start. Realizing that you don't really hate him. Or fear him. That you don't even want to."

Tommy shook his head slowly. "I don't," he hesitantly agreed.

"Yup. Good first step. Next up, you might try talking." She glanced back from her computer screens. "After the grand opening all of us have to get ready for, that is." Her eyes went back to the screens, and in the glare from the grainy images she looked like she might be tired. "Which you should be leaving to get ready for soon. Like, now. 'Cause if you're still here in five to ten minutes,
he will be, too. And that would require you two actually doing that talking thing, which I don't think you're ready for yet."

Tommy was already starting to back away before she was halfway through that spiel, but stopped as she spun around in her chair again.

Something about the look in her big blue eyes—intent and studious and something else... maybe hopeful?—making him feel like a deer caught in headlights. Not because he thought he was gonna be road kill right now, that'd been a little while ago. But because that appraisal felt very, very important.

"Speaking of, when you do talk? You might want to swing at him a few times. I doubt he'll mind even if you hit him."

Tommy blinked at her again. "What—"

"It might help. Just remember, that the only way you'll land more than one very lucky punch? Is if he lets you." Her nose wrinkled a little as she thought about that while she said it, then she added: "Though that very lucky one might only happen if he lets it, too. He has pretty good reflexes."

"I think that may be more than I need to know," Tommy replied, blinking again as the teasing words fell all too easily from his tongue.

"Sorry," She raised both hands a little defensively, then dropped them with a shrug. "I'm just saying."

Tommy wasn't sure how to respond to that, or the surprising urge to smile he wasn't really trying to suppress. So instead he glanced around, then asked her, "Can I come back?"

"Sure," Felicity agreed a lot more easily than he'd asked. "But, F.Y.I: he spends a lot of time down here. Pretty much any time he's not with his family or under the hood he's torturing himself on all of that." She gestured again at what looked like enough exercise equipment to fill a public gym. "And while I certainly don't mind the show, as long as he's not being too stupid and hurting himself, it probably wouldn't appeal to you so much."

No, it wouldn't. At all.
Just the vague reminder of exactly how much his friend had buffed up—on par with the ex-Special Forces bodyguard Missus Q clearly hadn't truly needed to hire—made Tommy wonder, not for the first time, if he should get a membership at Laurel's gym again. He'd had one before, that he'd gotten during the friends-with-excellent-benefits stage, but he'd typically worked out at one for one-percenter's that came with your choice of personal trainers and a spa. When he'd felt like it from time to time. His annual membership there had expired at the end of the year, of course, and after being cut off he couldn't remotely afford to renew it. Honestly, he'd been a little surprised that his father hadn't bothered to have his membership rubbed out by the penny counters before that: months earlier along with his credit cards and everything else. But either way he certainly couldn't afford to renew it when he was just living on fumes at the start of the year. Ollie, he was sure, wouldn't bat an eye if he asked about it, but that wasn't something he could do. Or should.

"Also more than I needed to know," Tommy found himself saying to the blonde. His eyes were drawn to what had to be equipment for some weird gymnastics thing up by the ceiling, but he was pretty sure he didn't want to ask about that either.

She caught him looking at it anyway. "That's the salmon ladder."

"What's it for?" Tommy wondered, made even more curious by the wistful look she shot the contraption in response.

"Distracting me," Felicity sighed. Then she shook her head again. "Anyway, you really should get going. But I'm here a lot, too. When I'm not at Q.C."

"Then I guess I'll see you around." Tommy nodded slowly, then blinked as something else occurred to him. "Wait... he runs around in that green leather getup during the day?"

While he wasn't entirely sure how his vigilante friend did most of what he did, Tommy was pretty sure most people would notice if they saw someone around the city in green leather during the day. And they'd definitely remember the bow and arrows. Weren't ninja's supposed to only come out at night?

Felicity laughed again, "No. He's just out on his motorcycle. Seeing if he could spot... well, Digg told you to beef up security here, right?"

Tommy nodded, "For some crazy chick," he shook his head. "Not sure if the guys we hired will take it all that seriously."
"Then they're not very good guards," the blonde retorted, before her frown fell with another sigh. "But men underestimating the amount of damage a dangerous women can do if she's given cause isn't anything new." She hesitated, then admitted, "From what Digg told me, she really took Oliver by surprise, too."

"How did they meet?" Tommy asked, curious despite everything else. He couldn't for the life of him remember anyone Oliver had dated other than the woman he was talking to right now. And Laurel, of course.

There'd been that woman Oliver was with when Laurel had turned to him for help getting a table. The same unplanned double-date that'd led to Tommy finally telling his friend the truth about his father cutting him off. But honestly Tommy couldn't say for sure if he'd ever looked at the woman—he was going by his memory of Laurel's initial reaction to Felicity to know that she hadn't been a blonde or a redhead, after all—let alone anything else about her.

"Her father was the head of Italian mob here in Starling," Felicity replied like that was something normal for anyone to mention in their family history. "Long story short, he had her fiancé killed—"

"Wait," Tommy interrupted, blinking at her. "Oliver—"


The names sound vaguely familiar. In that way that meant he'd probably heard of the family a few times before, but never been personally introduced. The mob might have money—but not on the same scale that the Queens and Merlyns did. And money from organized crime was always tainted by association. So while their circles might sometimes touch, they rarely crossed or intermingled.

"Helena started working to destroy her father's organization. For revenge," Felicity went on explaining. "She almost shot Missus Queen when she killed one of her father's men."

"That was her? On a motorcycle, right? Why would he..." Tommy trailed off when he saw the patient look the blonde was giving him. "You were getting to that, right." He gave her his best grin, though it was probably feeble after not getting enough practice lately. "Please, continue."

Felicity's lips quirked into an almost smile of her own as she nodded, but it fell as she went on. "This was before I joined the team—officially, anyway," she shrugged. "But Digg says it was
obvious that someone was gunning for Bertinelli’s men. That Missus Queen was just unfortunate in whom she was standing next to that day."

"Wrong place, wrong time?" Tommy frowned, not liking the way it sounded at all. But it was never supposed to sound good, was it?

Felicity shook her head. "I’ve read the police reports about the same incidents."

"Incidents, plural?" he caught, and she nodded again.

"The man that was murdered that day was the third homicide involving one of the higher ups in the Bertinelli crime family last year. The S.C.P.D had been keeping track of it, of course, but the profile wasn't lining up with any of their usual suspects."

"What, like the Yakuza?" Tommy wondered.

Felicity shook her head. "No. That'd be Japanese organized crime—and they currently have very little influence here in Starling. The prominent groups here, back then were the Bertinellis and the Triad—the Chinese mob."

"They were—"

"They were hired to kill your father a few weeks ago, yes." Felicity nodded. "Bertinelli's arrest made room for the Triad to grow, and the Bratva have gotten a bit bigger according to the S.C.P.D, too."

"The Bratva?" Tommy repeated, not sure he really wanted to know, but she was saying it all like they were terms he should recognized so he might as well ask.

"The Russian mob."

These were the sort of things Oliver's real friends apparently had to know these days....
Tommy shook his head slowly. "So she got what she wanted, then?" he asked as it all clicked together. "Helena Bertinelli, right? She wanted her father's mob to fall? So why's she a problem now?"

"Because she didn't get what she wanted," the blonde shook her head yet again. "Oliver disagreed with her methods." She paused a moment, as if considering how to explain it, then went on. "She wanted to start an all-out mob war between the Chinese and Italian mobs."

"That... doesn't sound good," Tommy guessed.

"If it'd happened that way, Missus Queen wouldn't have been the only innocent caught in the crossfire, and the next ones probably wouldn't have been so lucky." Felicity told him.

"So Oliver stopped her?"

She nodded again. "He did."

"Why didn't he just help her some other way?" Tommy wondered. "Put a-an arrow in her dad, I guess?"

It sounded easier in his head before he started to say it, but as it was coming out of his mouth he remembered he was actually talking about his friend voluntarily ending someone's life. And the idea of Oliver killing people as easily as Laurel's father made it sound when the vigilante was involved was still unsettling for him. Even if the guy they were talking about was some big mob guy.

"He tried to help her." Felicity told him. "He made sure the police got all the evidence they needed to finally arrest Frank Bertinelli, and kept the Triad—and Helena—from killing him. So the bloodbath that could've easily happened afterwards, didn't."

"Wait—she wanted to kill him?" Tommy blinked at her.

"Yes."
"Her father?"

"Yes."

"And Oliver stopped her?"

"Um-hum."

Tommy shook his head, sure he was missing something. "Why?"

The blonde didn't answer right away this time, instead she looked thoughtful for several seconds.

It couldn't be the first time she'd thought about it. Especially not since the so-called 'psycho ex' they were talking about had shot back into town. (And Oliver's bodyguard had really called her that.)

"The problem with killing for revenge is it doesn't fix the problem," Felicity answered slowly. "Doesn't stop the cycle. Doesn't help anyone." She shook her head. "All it does is end another life—and put that blood on another's hands."

That all sounded far too philosophical for the friend Tommy remembered hadn't cracked open the bindings of even one of the books they were supposed to read for Intro to Philosophy during the short time they were both at Harvard together. But something about the thoughtful expression on that pretty face kept him from interrupting. Made him keep listening.

"He wanted to save her from that. He thought he could," Felicity shook her head again slowly. "He thought he could help her see that revenge wasn't worth what it costs. And that justice is the far worthier goal."

That sounded good—and not much like what Tommy kind of thought the Hood was about at all...

"So what happened?" Tommy asked.
"He taught her how to fire a crossbow, first," Felicity answered evenly. "Trying to teach her the value of accuracy, I guess. Of aiming."

"Isn't that important for guns, too?" Tommy asked, because the bow and arrow thing was still weird. And they were just talking about that a minute ago. She wasn't talking about someone not knowing how to fire a firearm though. She was talking about a woman that'd actually killed people with the thing.

"It is. But guns hold more bullets. Aim a spray of bullets in the general direction of you target, and chances are one of them will finds its mark. Even if most of them don't. The crossbow forced her to aim, reload, and aim again." The blonde's smile was odd, making him wonder if Ollie had given her archery lessons, too. But she kept going before he could decide if he even wanted to ask. "It wasn't an unworthy goal."

If the end result was Oliver tearing up the streets not long before their club was due to open, while his bodyguard worried about said opening being blown up by the woman he was trying to find, Tommy wasn't sure he could agree. But then again he still didn't know very much about all of this, did he?

Felicity smiled sadly. "He tried to help her. Tried to teach her." She shook her head. "But you can't help someone who doesn't want your help, Tommy. Can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved—especially not from themselves."

"Save her from herself?" Tommy repeated it, and it still didn't make sense when he said it out loud.

"Mostly from the guilt he expects her to feel if he lets her take her own father's life, I think," Felicity shrugged. "If Bertinelli had gone to jail for life, Helena might've been able to accept it. Might've eventually tried to move past it. But he knows too much for that."

Tommy blinked again, "Knows too much?"

It made sense that the man would probably know everything about his own crime businesses. But if he was the biggest fish in that pond, how could he be thrown back in for a bigger one?

"He was in charge here in Starling, Tommy, but the Italian mob has families and operations all across the country. All around the world. Like a hydra: one head falls, two or three more start fighting to take its place..."
And wasn't that a disturbing mental image? Tommy winced.

"Helena had done a pretty good job of destabilizing everything and angering the Triad. That's why they'd be hard pressed to take Starling back without going through a lot of trouble. But Bertinelli could trade what else he knew for his freedom. Names. Locations. Deals," Felicity shrugged. "Whatever it was, the Justice Department agreed to something. Now he's going to testify against his former associates, and in return he'll receive immunity and be placed in witness protection."

"That... sucks," Tommy decided lamely.

"It does," the blonde agreed. "But if it shuts down some bad stuff, or puts someone worse than him behind bars, or even just a few more like him," she shrugged once more. "It does work."

Tommy nodded, understanding that that was the way the criminal justice system worked in theory—though no one really liked it. "So why are we worried about her? If she's after her dad, doesn't she have to break into his jail cell to get him?"

"He's not in Iron Heights anymore." Felicity replied. "Even if they put him in solitary, someone who's turned on the mob wouldn't last long in jail."

"So he's already in witness protection? With the F.B.I or something?"

"Witness protection," Felicity confirmed. "Protected by the U.S Marshalls Service. He's due to testify to the grand jury here in Starling this weekend."

"Meanings she either has to find where they're hiding him and get through whoever's guarding him, or she'll attack at the courthouse," Tommy shook his head. "Either way, he's not gonna be at Verdant tonight."

"No, but Helena might."

"Why?"
"Because she knows she can't get to her father on her own." The blonde told him, clearly waiting for him to make the connection that came a few seconds later.

"Wait—she wants Oliver to help her kill her dad now?" Tommy shook his head again. "Why would he when he stopped her before?"

"Because she knows who he is," Felicity reminded him, and the obvious piece he'd been missing slammed into place like a train wreck.

"She knows he's the vigilante," Tommy shook his head slowly, not sure how he'd missed that obvious problem. Not when Ollie had been teaching her archery and his version of justice while they'd been dating.

"And that he's Oliver Queen." Felicity nodded. "Digg thinks he wanted to tell her, at the time, so he took the opportunity when it presented itself."

Tommy's frown was back. "I still don't get why we should be so worried about her showing up tonight. I mean, she's gotta know that Ollie can kill her," he shifted uncomfortably. "I mean, he's killed before."

"He has," the blonde allowed. "But she also knows he let her get away before. That he tried to help her before."

"Yeah, when they were hooking up," Tommy shook his head. "He's with you now."

The blonde's eyebrows shot up. "I think you know matters of the heart are never that simple." She went on before he could try to reply. "Besides, I'm not sure Oliver's ever had to kill a woman before. Let alone one he has feelings for."

Tommy blinked, segwayed again. Not really sure what to say to that. His mind mostly caught on the 'has feelings' part. 'Has' she'd said. Not 'had.'

"He's fought Chien Na Wei twice now, that I know of," Felicity went on. "She's one of the Triad's heaviest hitters. And she's very good. But I was watching their last fight through the security cameras at Merlyn Global. He's better than she it. He could have killed her, if he wanted to."
Tommy still wasn't sure what to say. He didn't remember any scary Chinese lady that night his world had been turned upside down and whacked all over the place. Just a lot of scary Chinese men. With guns.

But what she was talking about must've happened while the Hood—while Oliver—was holding off some of the attackers so Tommy and his father could get away.

Or maybe it was later, even, while his dad was dealing with the other two guys on the stairs... something surprisingly no one had ever asked about.

Or maybe it'd been happening while the bulletproof glass was exploding and his dad was getting shot.

Still, Tommy tried to think through what she was saying. "So... Ollie doesn't kill women?" he said it like a question, because he wasn't sure if that should be a problem or not. Maybe it was, when there was a crazy ex-mob boss's daughter and female assassins running around.

"I don't know," Felicity admitted, and he couldn't judge from her thoughtful tone or expression whether that bothered her or not.

He couldn't really say if it bothered him or not either.

After a few moments of thoughtful silence, he asked her. "So he's out looking for her now? On his motorcycle?"

Probably not dressed all in green with a bow and arrow on his back. Because no matter which one of his bikes Ollie used for vigilante work people would still notice him on it. Without all the green leather and the arrows, though, they shouldn't automatically associate him with the infamous modern-day Robin Hood they had running around the city these days.

"He is," Felicity confirmed. And from the amused look the blonde woman was still giving him, she knew exactly what he was thinking, so he didn't even try to hide it.

"Okay, well, I'll just go now."
She stopped him just as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, and Tommy? One more thing to think on..."

He turned back to face her, but her eyes were on her computer screens again by then.

"Remember, Oliver wasn't the only one to surprise you that night."

"I know that..." Tommy trailed off, then frowned as he was hit by what her words meant. "Wait, how do you—"

"I see all and know all. Well, almost." She turned back around to face him then. "Actually, we'd figured out your father was the target earlier in the day. We weren't sure how the Triad was going to attack him; the first assassin was a knife-specialist, and the ceremony wasn't really the right format for him but it was where it was supposed to happen. Getting access to the building security system was part of covering every angle," she shrugged slightly. "Though, obviously, we'd prefer if you didn't tell your dad about that. Strictly speaking it wasn't any more legal than vigilantism in general."

She had said something about security footage earlier, hadn't she?

Tommy found himself blinking at her again, then glancing at the grainy footage of cars and pedestrians, but before he could decide to ask one of the computers beeped and Felicity spun back towards her station.

"He's a few minutes out now," she told him over her shoulder, tilting her head towards the stairs he had to climb to go back inside the club. "He'll be coming in the side entrance, though, so if you still want to avoid him you'd better head back upstairs."

"Yeah," Tommy nodded, making himself turn around and climb the stairs. As he got to the top the light on the security pad turned beeped and green to let him open the door, but he still turned back towards her to call, "Thanks."

"No problem," she flashed him that bright smile he'd seen lighten his best friend's face a few weeks ago. "I'll be heading out to get ready soon, too. See you later tonight."
Tommy paused, his frown returning as he remembered the added worry about Verdant's opening that'd almost made him try to talk Laurel out of coming, but he hadn't been able to think of any good reason his girlfriend would accept.

Even if he told her the truth, that Ollie's bodyguard was worried about some dangerous ex of his showing up, that wouldn't scare the cop's daughter off. But Oliver's girlfriend obviously knew everything, so why would he let her come?

"Wait, you're coming to the opening?" Tommy stopped, staring at her in surprise.

The blonde's light laughter brought him back to the basement where she was smiling, "Oh don't worry, that's not me. He hasn't managed to scare me off just yet."

Tommy found himself returning her smile with a small one of his own, but it fell almost as quickly as it'd come. "But are you sure it's a good idea? I mean, I couldn't think of a way to tell Laurel not to come, but you—"

"I am going to be here tonight," Felicity interrupted firmly, but she was still smiling. "Thank you for your concern, but Oliver and I have already talked about it."

"Okay..." He returned a little unsurely. Still not really liking the idea of this helpful, if somewhat scary blonde being anywhere near some psychotic ex of Oliver's. At least Laurel was his girlfriend now, not Oliver's. But something about the smile the blonde was giving him now told him he wouldn't have any more luck with this argument then he had with the lecture she'd apparently dragged him down here for.

And he'd given Mister Diggle pretty much free reign to do whatever he wanted when it came to beefing up security for the opening, so everyone should be safe....

"Okay," Tommy nodded as he turned to leave again. "Well, I'll see you tonight then. Thanks, again."

As he went back into the club and closed the door to the poorly hidden secret lair behind him, he was pretty sure that the computer genius was smart enough to know he was thanking her more for opening the door to let him in than letting him back out.

Chapter End Notes
So there's another scene from Tommy's P.O.V. He may very well be getting more of them as time goes on. He's actually pretty easy for me to write and his head's not an uninteresting place to be at the moment...
And the club's about to open! THAT means all the episode's action HAS to start soon, right? *Looks around at all the muses doing various random things around the room*
It does, right? ...Right?
...Well, I THINK so?
Comments, suggestions, constructive criticisms and general insanity are always welcome. :-D
Thanks for reading! :-)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Well, I'm back! A lot's happened on Arrow since I last posted, but I'll save my comments on all that till the end. That way if you're not interested you can just stop reading!

First, however, I'd like to put out there that another author has started a story based on this series. An Arrow/Highlander fic called Guardian Angel, written by Lexi_the_dragon_muse with my blessings. It's NOT part of the series, as it spins off with a much earlier meeting, but it's based in the same verse, so if you like the crossover, give it a try!

(AO3: /works/6489232)

Also it's listed in my gifts, if that's easier to follow.

And, again, my thanks to Lexi for the wonderful start so far. :-D

Now, enjoy the new scene! :-D

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Oliver Queen's P.O.V.

Oliver hadn't expected to feel proud when Verdant finally opened. It was just a cover to him, really: and had Tommy not taken pretty much everything over—throwing himself into his first real job with the same enthusiasm he'd once planned all their parties and pranks with—it wouldn't be half as impressive as it was right now. Still, looking around at the club scene that had to be the hottest in the state right now, gave him an unexpected feeling of accomplishment. Like the first time he'd been able to draw a bow under Shado's tutelage. Or the time a while after that that he'd actually managed to win a sparring bout with the ex-A.S.I.S agent (though a part of him still thought Slade had let him win as a reward for his vast improvement in that timeframe).

Tommy was right, of course, on the deejay; Steve Aoki knew exactly what he was doing. Getting him on board for tonight was well worth the good-natured ribbing Oliver had gotten for seemingly waiting till Devon was happily married with kids before he called her brother for the favor. Oliver didn't know half of the songs the award winning musician was playing, but each and every one was electrifying the crowd on the dance floor. A promising start; it always helped the line outside when entrance into the club wasn't disappointing—not that Oliver had ever had to wait, personally, but he knew enough about the business side of the club scene to know that the wide smiles all around was a very good thing.

It was while he was gazing down at the dancing masses that he saw her, and found himself doing the same double-take he'd had to do so far every time he'd seen Felicity Smoak all 'fancied up,' as his sister would say.
She'd been striking in sparkling gold at the cancer fundraiser. Breathtaking in cobalt the night he'd almost forgotten Tommy's birthday party. And the green dress she'd worn to their first real date... well, Oliver hadn't honestly known he felt any particularly ownership of the color he wore as the vigilante before that night, but he really liked seeing her in his color. The gown she was wearing now wasn't green, but she was still stunningly beautiful in the same bright blue as her eyes when she really smiled.

The color and the length weren't what you typically saw in a night club—most party girls preferred erotic red if they could get away with it, or slimming black if they couldn't, and either way they tended to show a lot more skin. Her dress nearly swept the floor, and stretched up to wrap around her torso before it hugged the back of her neck. The only skin she was showing that her day-to-day wardrobe didn't typically display were her bare shoulders and upper back, but that was nearly hidden by the curtain of her golden curls.

The shoulder she'd hurt—that some bastard had hurt for her: had cut her—wasn't hidden tonight by her gown or her hair. The soft skin he could see there, exotically shaded by all the club's shadows and bright lights, looked unmarked. Like she'd not only healed far faster than he ever could've hoped, but almost as though she'd never been hurt... Or maybe she was very, very good with make-up, even though she rarely seemed to wear all that much of it? Whether she'd painted over the recently healed scar or not, he was sure she'd left her shoulder bare for him to see deliberately. It made sense, given how many times she'd insisted she was fine and he didn't need to check it to be sure—more sense, anyway, then why she wouldn't let him check her injury after those first two times...

The effect overall was very elegant, and it hinted at modesty that one wouldn't expect to find in a woman even half as beautiful as her. Or in someone who said some of the things she did—but then that blush that usually blossomed through the countdowns she stopped some of her babbles with said otherwise. Not the sort of thing anyone would expect to see in a nightclub, but then that was probably why so many people were moving out of her way as they watched her walk by. As she moved through the crowd towards the stairs that led the way up into the V.I.P section with the same sinuous grace he'd observed when she had a sword in her hands, the flowing silk of her skirt swayed to show a split that deliberately cut even higher up than the very short skirts that so many other women were wearing tonight: offering rapid glimpses of her lengthy legs that were as startling as they were sexy.

Oliver shook himself and quickly downed the drink he'd been carrying around, not even noticing if he liked the taste or not as he set the empty glass on the tray of the busboy that immediately appeared at his side, before he hurried towards the stairs. He was halfway down when she made it to the velvet rope, and called out before the bouncer could ask her name.

"Felicity!" Oliver finished the last half of the staircase in a few quick strides, almost too fast for the bouncer to get the V.I.P rope out of his way. And after a quick thought offered his arm to help her up the stairs like a gentleman, rather than wrapping said arm around her shoulders like he wanted to. It was conspicuous enough, his coming down to meet the eye-catching beauty himself, the
higher degree of familiarity that more possessive action would imply would definitely peak Helena's interest if she was here. "You look amazing," he told her as they started climbing the stairs, leaning down to speak right in her ear so he'd be heard over the music.

"You too. Not that that's a surprise," Felicity replied when they reached the top of the stairway, even though she didn't need to go up on her tiptoes to answer in his ear—both because he was still leaning down a bit to accommodate her and because the bling-encrusted shoes she was wearing had heels that lent her at least three, maybe even four, more inches of height, that still left her lips closer to his chin than his ear. "And this," she gestured to the club around them, "Is incredible!"

While she had been inside the Verdant more than a few times before now, so had he—they didn't spend all their time in the basement. All the same he both understood and appreciated the sentiment.

Verdant looked very, very different with all the lights and the music. And the people. The people happy to be here: having a great time and bringing this business to life. Legitimizing what had been only a cover story to him until tonight. To a lesser extent after Tommy came on board, of course, but even more so now that it was real. Despite however much the best friend who'd made it happen had to hate him now...

"It is, isn't it?" Oliver smiled back as he pushed that thought off again. He finally gave into the more possessive instinct to wrap an arm around her waist as they moved away from the stairs, reasoning that Helena couldn't enter the V.I.P section and neither could any reporters. He led her over to his table—one of them, anyway, technically he had one for every place in the club: three in the V.I.P section, but he picked the same one he'd been at alone before, along the edge of the balcony overlooking the club. It was a perfect vantage point of the area around them and had an even better view of everything below, but it also meant that any pictures that were taken of them would make most disregard Felicity and focus on the fact that this was his club.

Oliver disliked the idea of the brilliant woman he was helping into the spectator seat being thought of as just his 'flavor of the week,' like the thousands of girls he couldn't really remember from before the Island. But it was an important image if it'd keep her safe. For now, at least, it meant that a few glamorous photos with them together in his nightclub wouldn't stand out. He hoped.

The high stools were called 'spectator seats,' according to Tommy, back when his friend had still been talking to him about all the work and thought he was putting into making this place come together. Their modern style separated them from the more typical 'bar stools' and made them fit well with the decor they'd chosen for Verdant. Tommy had picked the style because they were just different enough to be memorable; Oliver still liked them now because they were comfortable.

"Another scotch, sir?" the head waiter of the V.I.P section was at their table before Oliver had
finished sitting down. Sachin was his name, wasn't it?

"No, I think we'll have wine now," Oliver decided, both because he knew Felicity liked it, his mother did, too, and he didn't actually want to drink tonight. He looked to his date, "Champagne, or would you prefer a red?" he asked, remembering she liked red wines (and just then recalling that he owed her a bottle from the Queen cellar), but not sure if she like one of the champagne's Tommy had bought in bulk for the grand opening.

Fortunately as the owner of the club it would be frowned upon for him to get wasted on Verdant's opening night, so not playing up the image of who he used to be wasn't necessary now. He'd have to throw himself into the partying at some point. Especially since he had no intention of hurting Felicity like he'd thoughtlessly hurt Laurel too many times. Which meant ruling out overtly flirting with party-girls interested in one-night-stands to create the illusion that he hadn't changed at all. He had changed, and maybe it was for the better that he had to admit that and figure out how to make his cover—and his secret, 'criminal career'—still work.

It did help that Felicity knew the truth. That he didn't have to lie to her. Sometimes he still started to: it came so automatically that often it was hard not to. But the bright, brilliant woman somehow didn't hold it against him. Maybe because she knew the truth. Maybe because she seemed to know every time, too.

"Hum, Cristal, right?" Felicity confirmed as she considered the offer.

Oliver nodded, adding after a quick second's thought, "I think we have Moët & Chandon, and Don Perignon, too." He was pretty sure those were the ones Tommy had talked about...

"We do, sir. And miss," the waiter interjected, just loud enough to be heard over the music pounding up from the dance floor and the chatter all around. "As well as Tattinger."

"The Cristal sounds good," his date decided, flashing maybe-Sachin a smile that made the younger man blush.

"Bring up one of the bottles," Oliver added. "And four glasses."

Since his mother and sister should be joining them soon. Legally, Thea was still three more birthdays away from being able to drink, but that hadn't stopped her yet, and even though a picture of her with a champagne flute in hand could cause a stir, the Q.C lawyers would quickly crush it
with a statement about sparkling water looking a lot like the sparkling wine, or something like that, and no one recently hired here would dare contradict it. And Oliver really didn't feel like causing a scene by trying to serve his sister a soft drink to raise for cheers tonight.

"Of course, sir," the waiter agreed with a bow of his head, before making another beeline for the bar.

"So?" Felicity cocked her head to the side and gestured toward the bar down below, where Tommy had been keeping an eye on everything (and refusing to come up to the V.I.P lounge where he'd be expected to sit with his 'best' friend) since the club had opened. "How do you think he took Digg's warning?"

Oliver groaned a little, the question almost making him wish he'd taken the waiter up on that second scotch along with the wine. "He took it. Digg doesn't think he's taking it seriously, but he did call in extra security from a private force at the last minute."

The genius seemed to agree with him that letting Tommy cool down was a good idea, but that hadn't stopped her from asking after Oliver's thoughts and feelings while they waited. Apparent waiting to talk did not mean waiting to think about it in Felicity's mind. What was strange was, while it bugged him a little, it also didn't. Not that that made much sense even in his own head.

"Yes, I noticed the army along the rope line," the blonde titled her chin towards the nearest pair of bouncers, who were hovering by the V.I.P bar that was really more of a server's station. "And in here."

Oliver shrugged, "No one'll question it. Something happening at our grand opening wouldn't be good, so a little paranoia's considered healthy."

The I.T girl snorted, "Something happening, yeah. But I doubt any of your guards are looking for a hot woman, wanted by the S.C.P.D and carrying a crossbow or not."

"No, I don't think Tommy told them that," the vigilante admitted with a slight grimace. A safe assumption to make, though he couldn't really know. "But it can only help."

While this wasn't something that would've been easy to talk to Tommy about before he'd told him he was the Hood, he still hated the timing of it all. If Helena had come back before his friend's father's life was at stake, Tommy would've teased Ollie for falling into bed with one of the crazy
ones. He would've asked if the sex was at least worth it, yeah, because that was the sort of thing they used to say. There would've been no worries over whether or not the security issues would be another problem between them though. Digg had said Tommy just let him take over the security, and looking around his bodyguard had brought in about as many bodies as he could to keep everyone here tonight safe.

"Yeah," Felicity sighed, then smiled as she looked around. "Everyone seems to be having a great time."

"They do, don't they?" Oliver also smiled a little, mostly because he knew she was trying to turn their talk towards less serious subjects. He hesitated a second, then indicated the floor belonged and asked, "Do you want to dance?"

It was something he should ask his date, even if it'd been years since he'd actually been on a club dance floor and doubted he'd feel half as comfortable as he used to there.

"No thank you," Felicity laughed, flashing him her bright smile as she gestured to her dress. "I'd rather not risk anything happening to this dress—it's one of my favorites. And if I go down to that dance floor with you, a rabid fan girl might attack me."

That surprised a laugh out of him yet again. "I'd protect you," he promised, half-serious and half-joking, just like she was. Only a little surprised to find himself smiling, too. At some point his being able to smile again—really smile—shouldn't be a surprise at all, but that hadn't happened yet.

"Thanks, but I prefer to avoid conflict," she told him, her smile still in place as their waiter returned carrying the ordered bottle of sparkling wine from France, one of the busboys bought a self-standing ice bucket to setup nearby. Almost half the tables tonight had a smaller bucket of ice on the table, of course, but the sacrifice of standing space was expected for the owner's convenience.

"Cristal, sir, and miss, vintage 2006," the waiter presented the gold labeled bottle to Oliver for approval, waiting till he received a nod before he started to remove the foil from the wire cage that enclosed the cork.

They watched as he wrapped the cloth napkin he carried for this around the cork, then twisted the tab to loosen the cage, tilting the bottle carefully to let the bubbles inside expand. After a moment he started to gently turn the bottle, letting the pressure inside slowly ease the cork out into the napkin he caught it with, any 'pop' a whisper too soft to be heard over the music. Then he poured the luxury liquid into two of the glasses the busboy had also brought over to their table—
everything completely by-the-book. Tommy had trained them very well.

"That was well done," Felicity complimented.

Making the man’s cheeks darken again. "Thank you, miss," he replied professionally.

Oliver knew Felicity would always be a favorite of the club staff. She would be, even if she wasn't his girlfriend—or going to be his girlfriend, he wasn't completely sure of the particulars of that. This was their third date, if every time they'd gone out together was counted, and there'd been no discussion of what they were to each other so far. That wouldn't matter to the staff here, though. No reasonable person could possibly dislike this sweet, gentle woman across from him, and most would love her.

Oliver knew he didn't deserve her, at all, but she'd already made it clear that that was her choice, so he tried to leave it at that.

"Ollie!"

Oliver turned towards his sister's voice and smiled as he saw the two Queen women cutting effortlessly through the V.I.P crowd, their entrance to the club having apparently escaped his notice. After pressing the expected kiss on his mother's cheek and nodding to his sister, he helped each of them into their own seats across from him and Felicity. "Mom, Thea, this is Felicity Smoak," he introduced them. "Felicity, this is my mother, Moira Queen, and my sister, Thea."

"Pleased to meet you," Felicity's smile was polite, but still sincere as she reached over the table to shake their hands. Seemingly perfectly at ease with meeting them in front of many of Starling City's eyes and cameras... something he probably should've warned her about. Though the genius hadn't asked why he'd wanted four glasses of champagne...

"And you," Moira replied smoothly, nodding to the waiter when he indicated the empty glasses.

"Same," Thea echoed obligingly, though the interest in her dark eyes was hard to miss: and it wasn't directed at the alcohol or the club at all.
"To Verdant," Moira raised her glass as soon as both hers and Thea's were full, and the rest of them followed her example. "I know I haven't always been supportive of this venture, but I have to admit this nightclub is quite an accomplishment," she smiled approvingly at him as she nodded. "I'm proud of you. Your father would be, too."

"Yeah, congratulations, Ollie," Thea followed up with a sisterly smirk before he could answer. "Your club doesn't totally suck."

"Thanks, Speedy," Oliver returned, smiling as he finished properly. "Thank you very much, all of you, for coming."

"Well, we couldn't really be anywhere else tonight, could we?" Thea teased again, smirking at him as she sipped from her flute. "Gotta give Q.C's P.R people credit, they pretty much made sure everywhere else but here would be dead tonight."

Oliver only blinked at that. It hadn't occurred to him that their family's company's public relations experts might be why so many media outlets had started advertising the soon-to-open nightclub not long after he'd first decided to open it. And why the news kept circulating, ever positive, afterwards. As the Queen heir, he'd grown up in the public eye. With paparazzi always appearing everywhere he went as far back as elementary school, whether they were supposed to be there or not. He'd been used to it just happening: both when that was convenient and when it wasn't. Because he was a Queen.

It made sense though: Queen Consolidated's P.R people being behind all the positive press his club had gotten with seemingly no effort at all. Of course Q.C would want his 'first' business, as his mother kept referring to it, to be a success. The Queen name was attached to it, so it had to be.

It also told Oliver that whatever his mother's thoughts on Verdant had been from the start, her husband—his now still missing stepfather—had clearly given it his full support. Yet another
reason Walter Steele *should* be here.

Moira shook her head at her daughter's antics, then decided to acknowledge his date again. "So, Felicity, what do you do?"

That could be a dangerous question in Moira Queen's typical circles—the heiresses she'd prefer he date didn't necessarily 'do' anything, daddy's money (or sometimes mommy's) ensured they didn't have to. Thus why they were called 'the idle rich.' A category Oliver had happily belonged to years ago, though back before the Island he could usually claim he was a student—college was obstinately expected back then—no matter how many times he dropped out.

Felicity's beautiful and flattering dress was not designer though. It had to be tailored to fit her slender curves so perfectly, but his mother and sister knew all the designers' latest catalogs, just like most other rich woman in the world, so to them it was a tell.

One that they didn't need because they already knew the answer to the question. They knew that she worked with computers at *Queen Consolidated*, he'd told them that. So his mother was only making the polite conversation to get it out there. Probably.

It wasn't even an expression of disapproval on her part. His mother had adored Laurel, who's drive and idealism she'd hoped would help him find his own well buried ambitions. He could only hope she'd accept Felicity with at least some aplomb.

"I work at Q.C, actually," Felicity admitted with a barely discernible wince that made Oliver remember just then there was another problem, too.

No matter what relationship she'd had with Walter while she was digging into the List for him, it had to be awkward now. Talking to Walter's wife, who was also Oliver's mother, and now the Acting-C.E.O of *Queen Consolidated* while Walter was missing and probably presumed dead by now...

"In *Computer Sciences and Support,*" Felicity finished.

Oliver blinked at her again in real surprise, because he was sure she worked in the *I.T Department*. That was where they met, after all... but her office had moved soon after that, hadn't it?
"Oh, I see," His mother feigned only slight surprise, limiting its revelation to just a blink because it was expected of her. Moira Queen had always been a good actress.

Just now, however, Oliver couldn't really say if his mother was mostly hiding her surprise or just faking it. Then again, he hadn't even realized her job had changed to a different department in the company back when he was still going to her for I.T support. At least the other department had something to do with tech support, too. He hadn't known there was another computer department at Queen Consolidated.

His mother, however, as acting-C.E.O, probably did.

But Oliver wasn't sure, either, of what the different department might mean. Or if it was strictly another department separate from I.T or not. Though the 'Sciences' in the name could explain how she was able to keep getting back to him so quickly with favors that weren't directly computer related. Testing the Vertigo, especially, came to mind...

"Really?" Thea didn't feign shock at all, and she didn't try to hide her curiosity either. "Like, solving computer problems?" She'd always liked her brother's longtime girlfriend. Always been impressed by her academic record—the opposite of Oliver's—and her ambitions to be a lawyer, which had since been realized. A tech expert who worked at Q.C might not be as impressive to her as a lawyer, at least not until she actually saw Felicity near a computer, but thankfully his sister didn't seem to care about that.

"I'm still doing computer support," Felicity nodded, taking a sip of her champagne before adding. "Though I'm not sure I'm supposed to be."

Oliver blinked. "What'd you mean?" He really couldn't imagine his I.T girl doing anything else; and the thought that she might want to be bothered him more than a little. Especially since she hadn't ever bothered to tell him about being in a different department now.

"Well, um, Mister Steele promoted me, remember? Back in October?"

"Yeah, you got a new office," Oliver shook his head, not letting himself wince even when he noticed his mom catch the time reference. (Was that before or after the nameless girl he'd made up to get his mother off his back about losing Digg when he wanted to? After, he hoped.) Thinking that made him hurry on, "Threw me for a bit of a loop when you weren't at your old desk. Think I may have given the new guy that was moving in there a meltdown that day."
"Oh, Larry's usually like that," Felicity reassured lightly, laughing a little before she went on to explain. "My new 'office' is right next to the servers, because I'm supposed to be the Database and System Administrator."

"'Supposed' to be?" his mother reiterated, clearly more curious than confused right now. The mention of her missing husband hadn't seem to phase her, but then again she was filling in his position at the company; his name had to come up in passing, at least occasionally.

"My old supervisor kept sending my job orders for the general I.T department, and I kept filling them," Felicity sighed, shaking her head slowly. "So payroll kept paying me for that, and my new jobs. So, technically, I have three jobs at Q.C right now."

"Three?" Oliver repeated, a little horrified to realize that the help she gave him with gradually increasing frequency could only be considered a forth job. Fifth, if he counted accepting her help on making sure Verdant's tech setup was everything it was supposed to be.

"You mean part-time?" Thea wondered with a confused frown. Some of her eager curiosity turning into concern as she undoubtedly recognized that this was strange enough to confuse their mother and bother her brother.

"No, I don't believe we offer part-time positions outside of intern work," her mother answered with a frown before Felicity could reply. "It's not like Walter," she stumbled only slightly, for just a second, over his name, before going on, "It's not like him to leave anything such a mess, but," she sighed, shaking her head. "He wasn't expecting to go anywhere, either."

"I know," Felicity replied, hesitating a moment before going on. "I was talking to him the night he disappeared. I called him about a report he'd been waiting for—but I caught him as he was leaving, so he was going to call me back once he got out of the elevator."

Moira looked at the other blonde for a moment. "You contacted security that night," she realized, studying her more closely. "You were the reason they called the mansion then, instead of the next morning."

"Guilty," Felicity confessed with a wince. "I'm sorry I didn't look for him sooner. I knew something was wrong when I saw the security feeds were down... I checked when he didn't call me back right away 'cause I figured maybe he got caught in the elevator or—I don't know, something, but maybe if I'd looked sooner—"
"No, no. None of that," the Queen matriarch interrupted just as her son was about to. She reached across the table to catch the hand that Felicity had resting on the tabletop: her nails shimmering like emeralds against the white background and sparkled around his mother's gentle grasp, too. "You couldn't have known, dear," his mother went on, patting her hand reassuringly. "And I'm sure there's nothing more you could have done, but thank you for trying to help."

Oliver shook his head when Thea glanced his way in askance. He hadn't known about this, either. Their stepfather had been kidnapped months before Felicity came to him with Walter's copy of The List—the copy that'd belonged to his mother. And while Felicity had stipulated that helping him find Walter was why she'd decided to join the team, he hadn't thought about why it would matter so much to her. Why finding her boss should be important to her at all. But clearly it did matter, and it was important...

And Oliver wanted to do more than kick himself as he only now realized it. He hadn't put much thought into what'd be driving Felicity to search so hard for Walter. He should have wondered. Should have realized she felt guilty.

It wasn't like Oliver Queen didn't know guilt. Not that it'd always stopped him from making the same mistakes again and again. Had it ever stopped him?

Oliver forced himself to refocus as he saw his mother squeeze Felicity's hand and give her a reassuring little smile before she let go and sat back again.

"What was the project you were working on with Walter, Miss Smoak?"

"Figuring out my new position, mostly," Felicity answered after she'd swallowed a slightly too large sip of champagne she'd just taken.

Oliver knew that she wasn't entirely telling the truth there. Not entirely anyway. But he couldn't say she was wrong to not bring up The List with his mother, either. Or that he wasn't glad she didn't.

"And trying to figure out what changes need to be made for Q.C's systems to be secure from cyber attack. I should be done with that soon, after I analyze—well, I just have to check some, uh, things first, to make sure."
No amusing innuendoes snuck in there, so Oliver could only assume her sudden babbling bout was about not admitting she was a hacker to his mother. Though it had to go hand-in-hand with the cyber security angle, didn't it? Just as much as knowing how to fight was a necessary aspect of physical security work. You wouldn't hire a bodyguard who wouldn't be able to protect you from attack, after all.

Moira looked thoughtful. "He said something about that," she frowned in remembrance, though her next words made it clear it wasn't anything to do with talking about her missing husband. "I asked Mister Stevenson about our computer security just last week. He didn't mention any problems."

"There hasn't been anything I couldn't handle," Felicity hurried to reassure her. "And the three jobs have been kind of fun. I like the bigger problem-solving, and a lot of the extra work was just the bigger problem-solving that no one else in I.T could figure out fast." She took another, smaller sip of champagne. "Then there was a bunch of mini-disasters, and it's kind of part of my new position to make sure those problems are fixed anyway, or you know, they're not supposed to happen. So fixing them is still sort of my job," she shrugged and took another little sip from her now half-empty flute.

Oliver was about to reach for the bottle in the ice-bucket when their waiter appeared and refilled her glass for him. He nodded in thanks to the other man, who also received a quiet 'thank you' from Felicity herself before he disappeared again.

"You said three jobs?" Thea spoke up again then, looking interested—all of them were more interested in what they were talking about, actually, than the music and dancing going on all around them.

Well, Oliver was interested and irritated as he was remembering. Remembering the Keurig Felicity had put in the Foundry and the one that was in her office at Q.C, too. Remembering his worry when he'd noticed just how often she used said machines. Remembering how tired she'd looked each time he'd visited her at home, and too many times at the Foundry, sometimes even during the day, too—her lack of sleep somehow hadn't made dark circles appear below her beautiful eyes yet, but how long could youthful regeneration hold out under such strain? Remembering, too, the disdain she considered her 'so-called supervisor' with, even as she refused to let him try to help with any problems at Q.C.

Felicity nodded as she swallowed the sip she'd just taken before answering, "The Database Administrator and the Systems Administrator are usually two different people, especially in big companies, but Mister Steele wanted to see if the roles could be combined into one," she shrugged. "And I guess I was the most qualified."

Oliver hid a snort by taking another sip of his own champagne, a little amazed at how humble the
"You have your Bachelor's in Computer Science, Miss Smoak?" the Queen matriarch asked, looking thoughtful.

"Doctorate, actually." Felicity replied evenly, going on as the three Queen's stared at her. "From M.I.T. It's not exactly normal, but I like to learn. And my brother and I are kind of completive about that sort of thing, so I kept going after I graduated in 2009. Started at Q.C that year, and finished my dissertation mostly online."

"How old are you?" Thea blurted out.

Felicity blinked at her, then laughed. "C.S comes easily to me," she answered the shock behind the question rather than the question itself, then went on with, "At least I'm not bored anymore. Probably dangerously dependent on caffeine, but not bored."

That wasn't good enough for Oliver. It wouldn't be even if they weren't dating. Even if she was just his tech girl.

She spent almost as many hours here, down in the basement, as she did at her day job. Sometimes more. Helping him just about every night now. The constant coffee and covered yawns were clearly more serious than he'd thought.

"Well, that shows remarkable work ethic on your part, Doctor Smoak," the eldest Queen answered her evenly, very visibly settling into her role as Acting-C.E.O of the company. "But it's abusive of Queen Consolidated." She reached into her purse and pulled out the small folder she kept her business cards in. "Here's my card, my cell's on the back. I won't be in the office tomorrow, but I can meet you first thing on Monday morning. Give me a call if that doesn't work for you, yes?"

Felicity blinked at her, this time looking surprised herself, like she couldn't imagine why Moira Queen, the C.E.O—acting or not—of the company she worked for would want to meet with her. But she knew Walter well enough to care when he was abducted and never found. And Oliver had known her long enough to recognize that she only looked surprised because she wanted to. "Yes, ma'am," she bowed her head slightly. "And thank you."
Moira nodded back with a small smile that he thought was almost approval from her, which was surprising because it'd taken Laurel weeks to get the same look. Maybe his mother had mellowed with age... or Oliver wasn't in high school anymore and she had just gotten him back from the dead not even half a year ago.

That's when he was hit by yet another surprising realization tonight.

Felicity could've come to him with this at any time in the last month. She could have said something to him even before she'd saved his life, during any one of the times he'd turned up at Queen Consolidated with his last name, need of a favor from her and a bad lie as to why. She didn't. Probably out of some misguided belief that he had more than enough on his plate, and not wanting him to burden him with problems she thought too small to worry him over. It was a relief that she'd seized the opportunity to present the problem to his mother, someone who theoretically could fix it with relative ease. But it did make Oliver worry about all the times his gut had told him she wasn't all right... clearly a discussion they had to have in detail.

"Hey, there's Tommy!" Thea sounded surprised, which didn't make sense till he saw she was frowning down at the club floor. Specifically towards the bar, where Tommy was still watching the grand opening unfold around him instead of coming up to the V.I.P section to watch from above. With them—specifically not with him, but his sister couldn't know that. "And look, Laurel's here, too." His sister's frown turned toward him then as she asked, "Why aren't they coming up here?"

Oliver shook his head, not knowing how to pacify his sister when he still felt Tommy had every right to be angry with him—to hate him—for all the lies he'd told. Their mother answered before he could.

"Remember, he's working, Thea," Moira reminded her daughter mildly.

"Yeah, but Laurel's not." Thea shot back, still frowning. "She could be up here with..." she trailed off, her frown deepening as she seemed to remember that Tommy's girlfriend was also Oliver's ex with every reason to hate him, even though Laurel was somehow a better person than that. "They should be up here," she continued stubbornly a second later. "I mean, it's not like he's doing anything down there."

"He's making himself available just in case he is needed," Moira told her, smiling slightly as she sipped her own champagne. Visibly amused by the fact that she was now excusing one former partier to another, though there might be some pride there, too.
"Why can't he do that from up here?" Thea demanded, glancing back and forth between her brother and the man she didn't know probably didn't consider himself his best friend anymore. "Like Ollie?"

Her eyes flicking over to Felicity for a second made her brother recognize why she was unhappy. His sister wanted to talk to Tommy—probably about that friend she'd been asking him to give a job to, since he had told her to tell Tommy it was okay with him. But she'd also wanted to meet the woman sitting next to him ever since the two Queen women had caught him headed out for his first real date with Felicity, so she didn't want to leave yet, either. Stuck between one desire and another... it probably shouldn't mean so much to him that getting to know his new girlfriend was winning out so far.

And Oliver wasn't worried about Tommy giving her any trouble. The other former playboy was too good a guy to hold his discovery of Oliver's dual identity against either of the Queen ladies. He'd grown up with them, too, after all. Despite his teasing when Oliver had first gotten back, Thea was as much Tommy's sister as she was Oliver's: in everything but blood.

"I'm sure Tommy and Laurel will come up to join us soon enough, Thea," their mother spoke up again, and she indicated the pair of spectator chairs that sat empty nearby. "That's what those are for, after all."

They were undoubtedly there for exactly that reason. It wasn't like Tommy would've told the staff setting up the V.I.P section not to make sure there were chairs for him and his girlfriend at the best table, after all. So of course they would've assumed there should be six seats at this table, and every other table that technically was reserved for Oliver's family and closest friends to move about the club. Since Thea wasn't dating anyone—as far as Oliver knew she hadn't brought anyone home since he caught her with that kid at the Christmas party—and Walter was still missing, maybe dead.

His mother might be right, however. At least Laurel was here with Tommy now. Maybe she'd be able to help him find his way out of his current stew, no matter how much Oliver did deserve every bit of his anger. The too good for her own good lawyer had done more than her ex could've ever hoped for his sister when he'd asked for her help, and Tommy she was still dating. Happily, he hoped.

"What was your thesis about, Doctor Smoak?"

Oliver turned back to the table, interested in the answer even though he'd be surprised if he understood any of the details. At all.
"Please, just call me Felicity," she said by way of answer.

Moira smiled back in response, and he thought maybe it looked a little less polished—though not as real and unguarded as Thea's—as she nodded her agreement. "What was your thesis about, Felicity?" she modified the question.

This time Felicity answered, "Management of assets and security in multifaceted systems."

And again she surprised Oliver; this time with words he could actually understand. Though they were probably the title, or maybe subtitle, of her thesis, and the details that made it worth giving her a doctorate were considerably more complicated. He also understood how her earning a doctorate on that premise would bring her to Walter's attention for the position he'd apparently promoted her to not too long before he disappeared.

Apparently his mother could too, because there was approval in her eyes again—this time, unexpectedly, for the girl he'd chosen rather than the triumph of the opening that was more Tommy's than his. "Quite an accomplishment."

"Thank you," Felicity didn't deny it, but Oliver knew her gracious gratitude could only improve her image in his mother's eyes.

"Sorry to bother you, Mister Queen," their waiter apologized as he stopped at their table again, handing him a folded piece of paper. "They said it was urgent."

Oliver accepted it with only a small frown, then had to force that frown to stay small as he unfolded the note and read the words scrawled there.

\[ Meet me \]
\[ downstairs. \]
\[ Now. \]
\[ Dig. \]

It was clear and to the point. But it was also wrong; off. The penned letters were bigger than his bodyguard normally wrote with—not that Oliver was overly familiar with Diggle's handwriting. The ex-soldier didn't usually send notes. Texts, maybe, but not notes... and he always spelled his nickname with both of the g's in his last name. Besides, Digg was supposed to be monitoring
security up front as much as he could...

Obviously something was wrong though. So Oliver did have to go downstairs, even if it was Helena rather than John Diggle that'd summoned him there.

"Is everything alright?"

Apparently his careful control of his face wasn't enough to fool his mother, which meant it wouldn't have worked on Felicity either. Or Thea, for that matter, since all three of these important women in his life were watching him worriedly.

"Yeah," Oliver lied anyway, forcing the frown into a smile as he looked up at them, and indicated the champagne bottle that was still half-full next to their table. "We ran out of Cristal. I'll be right back."

"All right," his mother accepted, her almost too small to see frown not fading as she watched him get up.

"Thought that was what Tommy was downstairs for," Thea's grumble was barely loud enough for her brother to hear, but she didn't seem to expect a response so he ignored it.

Oliver could see in Felicity's concerned eyes that she wanted to argue, or demand more of an answer—aware of what the real problem probably was. But in front of his mother she really couldn't, so she only nodded.

"Okay."

Not surprisingly, his mother started speaking again before he was more than a few steps away from the table. "So, I'm afraid I've been rather focused on managing public image and the like since I took over. Have I missed anything else so far?"

Oliver didn't let himself flinch. He knew he'd have to apologize for this. From what he'd seen so far Felicity didn't have holding a grudge in her, so she might not make him beg for forgiveness but he'd understand if she did. Abandoning her to his sister and mother's mercies wasn't something the vigilante wanted to do, no matter how approving and welcoming the two Queen women seemed. But he had to if something was happening...
So Oliver hurried down the stairs, exchanging quick nods and equally quick smiles with the few people that noticed him crossing the club—carefully evading Tommy and Laurel's line of sight by not going near the downstairs bar as he rounded the room. Going through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door that Felicity had insisted on blocking the hallway that led to the basement entrance with, passing the break room and the small kitchen that led off of the same hallway behind it, and nodding to the bouncers that were trying to not fall asleep by the door at the end of the hall that only employees entered through. Then he keyed in the password at the indoor entrance to his 'Arrow Cave,' as Felicity wanted it called. He hadn't decided if he could accept that name or not yet. Mostly because he couldn't think of an alternative he liked any better, which would be at all...

Oliver hadn't noticed as he'd hurried down one set of stairs towards the other that Laurel was standing alone by the bar now. If he had, he would've wondered where Tommy had gone. But he was busy avoiding that confrontation. He wouldn't, however, have expected what he found as hurried down the stairs into the basement. "Digg?" he'd called when he was halfway down, but when he reached the bottom of the stairs the struggle that'd been out of sight before that made him stop and stare for a stunned second.

Helena wasn't entirely unexpected.

Tommy pinned face-down to a table with his wrist painfully turned in her grip—his arm forced up behind his back, effectively being tortured in the pain compliance hold he'd been in for who knew how long now—was not a surprise Oliver wanted to find at all.

"Let him go," Oliver ordered immediately, the harsh words like punches he almost wanted to throw, but couldn't.

Helena covered her instinctive flinch by forcing Tommy's arm back a bit farther, and his painful cry made the vigilante try to reason with her.
"He has nothing to do with this."

"I told you," Helena shook her head. "Oliver, I warned you."

"Helena! This isn't you," he objected, though a large part of him didn't believe it at all. Still, the part of him that'd seen her broken heart in her eyes when she was talking about her murdered fiancé couldn't hate her.

"My father is a mobster and a murderer." She spelled out for him once again, raising her voice as she finished. "It is not like you haven't killed men like that before!"

Oliver shouted right back. "And I tried to teach you to obtain your objective without killing!"

Helena appeared to consider that for only half a second, then she nodded. "By applying leverage. By exploiting someone's weakness," she twisted Tommy's wrist just a bit further as she finished, deliberately bending his fingers the wrong way this time.
Tommy's agonized scream echoed around the Foundry, dying off into tortured gasps as she stopped to go on as Oliver was trying to make himself attack her to save his friend.

"There is a whole club full of leverage above our heads right now." Helena snapped at him, her pained gaze giving him pause as she went on beseechingly. "Please, Oliver. Don't make me do something that both of us will regret."

He stared back at her for a second too long, and then Tommy was screaming again; leaving only one thing he could say. "Okay!" he paused, watching as she stopped applying the painful pressure again, going on over his best—very likely ex-best—friend's stuttered cries. "Okay. You win. I'll help you. Now let him go."

For another long moment the brunette stared back at him, clearly trying to assess his sincerity; wanting to believe him but knowing better. Cruel life having taught her that harsh truth that no one could really say was better, but that didn't make it any less true.

"Let... Him... Go!" Oliver finally snarled, and this time she did.

Helena released her hold and backed away several steps.
Immediately, Tommy screamed again, yanking his arm back around and cradling his hand in front of him as he stayed bowed over the table, shaking as his body reacted to pain like he'd never known before—every nerve firing off warnings of something wrong. Very, very wrong. Even though the initial cause had stopped, that didn't mean it'd stop hurting anytime soon.

Oliver stared at his friend for a long moment, not sure what to do. Not sure if Tommy would accept help from him after this. If he would have even before this, all things considered.

And trying to ignore the practical part of him that was telling him he should stop all of this right now. By killing the woman at the heart of it all.

He couldn't.

Not when he knew she could've threatened his friend's life. He could've come down here to see her aiming her crossbow, or a gun, at Tommy. Instead she'd hurt him to make her point... but as much as he hated that, she hadn't threatened to kill him. Her backup, again, was exposing the vigilante's secret if he didn't agree even with her hurting his friend.

And Oliver couldn't completely blame her for that. Not when it was something he might do. Not when he'd done worse.

"Tommy, I'm gonna call Digg down here," He told his still shaking friend, and the woman that'd backed away from them both as he came around the table. "He had medical training in the Army."

Tommy didn't verbally answer him, but it looked like he tried to nod into the table, still gasping and clutching his hand protectively.

Oliver's scowl sent Helena even further away as he stalked over to grab the computer chair that was set to Felicity's specifications and rolled it closer to his friend. "Here, sit down."

For a moment it looked like Tommy wasn't going to do it, like he was just going to stay there, still bent over the table with his face resting on the metal surface, like he didn't have the strength to move. But then he groaned as he forced himself to reach back with the arm he hadn't been tortured with to find the armrest, using that to guide his still shuddering body down onto the cushions. There he sat, still bent over, his unhurt hand immediately returned to cradling his left protectively in his lap now as he tried to stop shaking.
Not that Tommy knew how to do that. He'd never had to ride out agony while being tortured before. As far as the vigilante knew, his childhood friend had never known any pain worse than some of the nastier hangovers they'd both brought on themselves years ago.

"It'll be a little while before the adrenaline wears off," Oliver told him as he tapped out a quick text to Digg.

**Tommy's hurt. Come to the Foundry. ASAP.**

"Yeah. Doubt it's gonna stop hurting then," Tommy groaned out, sounding more tired—and, of course, hurt—than angry. Surprising, since anger had pretty much been his emotion around Oliver for the last week. But physical pain had to trump emotions. Most of the time anyway.

Oliver winced, fighting the urge to glare at Helena again.

At least she was smart enough to keep quiet and out of the way for now. Maybe she even regretted hurting his friend. He'd believed her when she'd apologized for hurting his mother.

When his phone vibrated he glanced back at the screen as Digg's expected reply appeared.

**Be there in 5.**

Then, with a glance at the brunette, Oliver quickly tapped in:

**She's here too.**

When it came, long seconds later, he could almost hear the sarcasm in the other man's response.

**Great.**

Honestly the archer was more surprised that Diggle didn't ask permission to shoot her when he showed up. But then the soldier might think it better to ask forgiveness than permission in this case, and the vigilante couldn't really say he'd be wrong. Hopefully, Digg's already legendary control would win out and Oliver wouldn't soon find himself playing referee between his bodyguard and the woman he'd tried to save from herself. It was hard to say; the ex-soldier has mostly responded to her before by not being around when she was...
Author's Note included in the chapter because I have too much to say, sorry.

First, if you didn't see it in the A/n at the start: Lexi_the_dragon_muse has started a story based in this universe (same Immortal-Felicity: Felicitas). It's called Guardian Angel, and it's listed in my gifts if you go to my profile, but on AO3 it's /works/6489232. The story is NOT part of THIS series. It's the same background, but spins off from that as an AU with a much earlier meeting. It's based in the same verse, however, so if you like this crossover you should enjoy it. I certainly have thus far. Kudos to Lexi! :-D

Now, back to Bloody Secrets...

Well, there's the first club scene! If you're wondering, I did debate changing Helena-torturing-Tommy thing a bit for this scene, but it worked out too well, so I decided to just keep it. Hopefully the next scene will explain better how it still happened even after Felicity's secret little intervention before this...

And, believe it or not, we have finally gotten to several scenes that I've pre-written. Meaning I don't have to actually write them now: just tweak them to fit into their place in Bloody Secrets, edit and post. So the wait between updates definitely should not be as long as it has been lately. (Sorry, again, about that.)

Competing with that, however, is that today is my last day off for... well, more than a week. I'm not sure if I have next Wednesday off or next Thursday. But I'll be working straight though at least until then and my days are all going to be long. Then this current seasonal job (yes, if you want to know, it's tax related) ends. Which last year meant I had a little time off... but my next seasonal job called at the start of the month wanting to know how soon I could start this year, so that might mean no time off till at least NEXT weekend. *sigh* The paycheck's definitely nice, and I like all the people I work with, but all that work without a real break usually fries my brain a bit. So if updates DON'T start coming quickly after this, or if they do but they stop or slow down for a bit: that's one reason why.

The other reason is my other Arrow crossover. I really want to update that fic but the next scene just hasn't wanted to end yet (remember how I complained back in Deadly Dances about the scene that'd never end? How is it happening again?) so I'm focusing more on that, too.

As for my show comments:

SPOILER

ALERT!

...

On the Olicity breakup. We knew it was coming. It sucks. Its still stupid. I don't think it'll last, though her leaving the team too threw me a little. The fake wedding was wonderful. That episode somehow made me like Cupid a little.

Curtis is working his way to being a favorite of mine in every scene we see him. Hopefully they don't decide to kill him off soon, too. His chip helping Felicity walk again was terrific. LOL. I would've preferred to see Oliver there for more of that, but that sidestory had to play.

ON TO MAJOR SPOILER IN AO3 A/N?
MAJOR SPOILER ALERT!
...
...
Laurel dying surprised me. I think they sort of threatened it as Darhk's means of controlling Lance for so long I just sort of forgot about it, if that makes any sense? Personally I'm of mixed feelings regarding it. Predominantly: relief that the wait on that damn flash-forward's big reveal finally being over. It was really bothering me. On Laurel being the one to die... well, honestly it kind of makes sense to me. The show's writers have always treated her character as either Oliver's ex or Lance's daughter. They've let her grow a little into her own, this season more than in any other, but for the most part she was there for Oliver and Lance to react off of. Or Sara, at least back in S2. She's had some good scenes, but character development for her has often felt like it was an after thought to me, and more than a few of her scenes/reactions just made no sense. Drama for dramas sake, which I've ranted about before. Ergo, she was always the expendable one if they weren't going to do anything with her; I just didn't realize the writers knew that. I've said before, too, that I don't see any way she could ever end up with Oliver making sense. Well, there's one way now: if LOT goes back into the past and stops Oliver from being a bad boyfriend to her back in high school, college AND The Gambit, they could work. The No Island fic: and no Arrow. She was typecast to be the angry ex and she wasn't bad at it. As the friend, teammate and ADA she made sense this season, but they weren't DOING anything more with her. Meaning they've probably released a comment excusing her death with the same reason they gave for Tommy and Moira: the character couldn't go anywhere. I hate every time I here that, cause of course the character won't develop themselves. Killing her as a way of finally giving up all the way on her getting back with Oliver just sort of seems petty to me. They could've had her date another lawyer. Or Wild Cat. Or, or, or... It's a combination of laziness, I think, and the writers wanting the show to be mostly about Oliver, I think. Not Team Arrow. Her 'death scene' was good acting all around. I didn't like it, because I've always seen her as Tommy's girl because that relationship worked and made sense for her so her saying Oliver was always the love of her life even if she wasn't his just sort of seemed like Lauriver fan service to me. And tasteless in that Tommy wasn't worth mentioning at all while she was dying even though she'd loved him before he died for her. Yes, Green Arrow and Black Canary are comic canon. Cartoon canon, too. But I never would've been okay with them ending up together in Arrow. Laurel had every reason to tell Oliver she wished he'd rotted in hell a whole lot longer than 5 years. That her sister didn't die then shouldn't erase his betrayal(s). Forgiving him and trying to be a friend to him again is one thing, but trusting him with her heart again? That'd always make even less sence than each time Felicity has turned on him has. Really I think the writers just kind of want Oliver to not have any happy longterm relationships. Like they think that's impossible, or maybe they really want him to go back to being a playboy so they could bring in a new hot actress every other week. Highlander did that: basically killed off Tess so Duncan could date other women in the present rather than just remembering the women he'd loved before he met her in flashbacks. Didn't make sense and seemed in poor taste to me then, too.
The other reason Laurel's death surprised me? Darhk has seemed very anti killing someone's kid before. He's threatened, but because of his own daughter he did not like Anarchy at all. Getting over that to kill Laurel because he told Lance he would? Well, I guess it makes sense but I didn't expect it.
That, however, brings me to what might be wishful thinking. If Darhk wanted Laurel dead, he knows how to kill quickly. Maybe he wanted her to say goodbye to her dad: a punishment and a mercy. But the doctor said she'd be okay. And then they went out of the room for whatever she asked Oliver for, before she started crashing off screen. So maybe she's not dead. I could see that being a trick to use against HIVE, maybe she had something to fake her death in her outfit and had Oliver use it. Maybe she had the doctor that was a fan do something to fake her death. I don't know, but it's not impossible. If they're going to bring her back and still not do much with her I think it'd be pointless, but Sara got her own show, sort of, and they could introduce Batgirl/oracle (who's name was already taken remember!), bring Huntress back and start up the Birds of Prey if they want to... wishful thinking, maybe, but it could be cool.
Thoughts on the show?
Comments on Bloody Secrets? (Always appreciated!)
Bye for now! :-)
Jess S
Sorry for the wait, though I did kind of warn you it might happen. Working over a week without a day off is mentally exhausting even without the work itself being mentally exhausting. My summer job's already started, but the hours aren't quite as ridiculous. And shouldn't be, at least until my OTHER new job starts, but that's a little ways off. So hopefully there's more fan fic writing time to come! Either way, enjoy this scene! :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity did not stare after Oliver as he hurried away. She refused to. Left alone with Moira Queen and Thea Queen like it was nothing to worry about, or not.

He was lucky she wasn't a twenty-something-year-old woman with only hacking, college and I.T work in her background. The mortal girl she might've been in a different world would probably be babbling already. Possibly about the attractive backside that was just sort of running downstairs. And since she was sitting with his mother and sister, that'd just be even more embarrassing than normal, even the normal innuendoes inspired by Oliver Queen.

But Felicitas wasn't that mortal woman. She was an Immortal, who'd lived many lives before this. She'd been married more than once, after all. For most of those marriages, in fact, her in-laws had been real royalty: and that was back when a royal title actually meant you were as close to absolute power as any human being could get.

Power, prestige and wealth weren't the problem here, however. It was that Oliver had left her alone with his mother and his sister, not too many minutes after introducing them. Their names and finances meant nothing next to that. And there was the fact that whatever that note had said definitely didn't have anything do with whether or not the club still had champagne.

"I'm sorry," Felicity offered the Queen matriarch the sincerest smile, "What were we—"

"Mom was asking you if she sucks as the C.E.O at Q.C," Thea Queen interjected with a small smirk as she took another sip of champagne that she really shouldn't be drinking.
The scrutiny in her eyes, that reminded Felicity of a cat with a mouse between its paws—debating if it was going to just play with it or eat it—seemed more relevant to Felicity than the fact that the eighteen-year-old was drinking alcohol. It wasn't too long ago, in the Immortal's experience, that legal age-restrictions on alcohol never would've been imagined. More relevantly, intoxication to the point of physical sickness was typically something only drunks did without a real reason before drinking was made a privilege of adulthood. Or maybe it had more to do with sickness being more treatable these days, so poisoning yourself somehow wasn't all that bad? Either way, one glass of bubbly from France was not going to knock semi-reformed party-girl Thea Queen over.

Moira shot her daughter a look, but didn't immediately correct her, so Felicity decided to just go with it.

"You know I can't judge the company as a whole, really. But the number of computer crises seems to be starting to go down at least."

"Were they a problem after," Moira swallowed before making herself finish, "Walter's abduc—after Walter disappeared?"

It was the first time she'd seen the woman struggle through saying something about her husband. In front of Oliver she'd put a lot of effort into being strong, but it was nice to see some amount of pain show through. As proof of, if nothing else, that Walter and Oliver—and Thea—all loved a woman that also loved them, no matter what else she'd gotten involved in that may've led to her husband's abduction when he tried to figure it out. As seemed to be the case, but the woman wouldn't appreciate her drawing attention to it, and her daughter had already winced at the stumble, so the Immortal only shrugged.

"I haven't heard any real complaints in the elevator or the break room. Well, except that time we ran out of coffee last week—that wasn't pretty, but I'm sure Starbucks appreciated it."

Both Queens laughed, and it didn't sound fake.

"So how'd you and Ollie meet? I know it was at Q.C, and he broke something, but what actually happened?" the teenager asked, her curiosity so plain in her eyes that it made her look more like a kitten than a lioness.

From the twitch of Moira Queen's eyebrow, she hadn't thought of the specific question: so it was something she'd already asked her son. Perhaps in detail, and perhaps it was a discussion her
daughter was there for, too. That didn't mean, though, that it couldn't be answered again. Or that it
wasn't one of those questions that'd be asked and answered so many times they might eventually
start saying some of it in their sleep. It was. If they lasted long enough for typical couples'
questions to keep coming back around so like that.

Felicity smiled easily. "He needed some files off a broken laptop, so he brought it to the I.T
Department. Then he kept coming back," she took another sip of her champagne before she went
on, not at all worried about drinking too much. It'd been a very long time since her Quickening
actually let her get drunk, or even tipsy, without a lot more alcohol than the whole bottle of Cristal
contained. Alcohol was a poison, after all, and the Quickening beat back every kind of death—like
death by poisoning—as long as she didn't literally lose her head. "Some of his requests were more
ridiculous than others," she finished.

"Wait," Thea blinked at her, surprise overtaking curiosity. "How long did it take him to ask you
out?"

"There's nothing wrong with taking your time, Thea," the teen's mother said for what sounded like
it wasn't the first time.

It likely wasn't. The world moved so very fast these days, in matters of the heart almost as much as
everything else. And love, at least, had to be worth slowing down for. At least as much as mortals
could. Sadly, none of them had very much time...

"No, there's not," Felicity agreed easily, because she did and because it worked for her answer. "I'm
not sure that's what Oliver was doing to start with, but maybe in a way it was."

"What'd you mean?" Thea asked with a frown.

Felicity shrugged. "As amazing as his smile is, that's all I got out of him that first meeting. Not that
I expected him to ask me out then, or soon after." She shook her head. "I just liked seeing him
smile each time he came back."

And she was intrigued by the puzzle presented by all his strange requests and really, really bad lies,
but he wouldn't appreciate her mentioning that his family.

"I can't decide if that's sweet or sad," Oliver's sister said honestly.
"Thea," Moira Queen immediately rebuked her daughter.

"What?" the girl answered defensively. "You were thinking it, too."

Felicity only laughed, real and easy. "It's a bit of both, I think." She shook her head again. "We became friends first. Learned to trust each other. Eventually he asked me out to dinner, and I said yes."

"That's a very mature outlook, Doctor Smoak."

"Felicity, please," the Immortal insisted again, not surprised the Queen matriarch had reverted back to the formality as soon as her son had unexpectedly walked away.

"Felicity," Moira nodded graciously. "I'm gratified you're willing to give Oliver the time he needs." She paused for a moment, then asked. "And what do you think of all of this?"

"This?" Felicity cocked her head to the side.

"This night club," Moira clarified. "Verdant."

"Really, Mom?" Thea sighed, and her mother sent her a quieting glance that made the teen needed to take another sip of bubbly to allow as the older woman looked back at the I.T expert.

Felicity answered slowly, watching the woman's face for the little reactions: her eyes and the barely-there wrinkles around them told much more truth than her expertly controlled smiles. "It's a business that makes sense for him. And for Tommy. It could be good for both of them."

"It could be," Moira allowed, the consideration in her eyes as careful as her vague nod. "But so could following in their father's footsteps."

"You want Ollie to take over at Q.C?" Thea looked as horrified by the idea as she sounded. "Mom, that'd suck so much it's not even funny. It's almost scary."
Her mother shook her head. "Hypothetically, if his business here does well—and it seems to be off
to a promising start—there's no reason he couldn't learn to run *Queen Consolidated* just as well."

"Except he'd hate it!" Thea protested.

And Felicity knew she was right. She hid a grimace with another sip of champagne. It was obvious
now that she was being tested, and while not really unexpected when you met a potential
significant other's family, it did seem a little ridiculous that this was happening before she'd even
gotten a second real date out of the man—not counting the movie nights that maybe she should.
But it had very little to do with the world moving faster every day, and everything to do with a
mother worrying for the son she'd lost once already. Whether she counted that night at Starling
City's most exclusive restaurant as their first date of three or their only real date so far, the
Immortal could still see that.

Of course, she could also see that Oliver's sister was right. He would hate working at *Queen
Consolidated*. That he didn't have the qualifications for the job could be overlooked with relative
ease. The education and experience standards supposedly expected today were relatively new and
thus subject to change still. Always subject to change actually. They were an aspect of this age's
business world that didn't necessary mean everything because it was his family's company. Some
would cry nepotism, certainly, but there was something to be said for outright ownership, too.

Any job at *Queen Consolidated* wouldn't work half so well as a cover career for his vigilantism,
which was what Oliver wanted to continue devoting most of his time to, and that couldn't be so
easily ignored. A wealthy club owner could spend a lot of his time at that club, but not *always* be
available there every moment of every day and night. That unavailability whenever the vigilante
was aiming arrows would be a hard connection to make, so it wouldn't raise half so many questions
as a businessman not being available when he should be. His mother would want him to start off
up high, whether he was ready for it or not, and an executive who kept the hours people associated
with vampires and might have to run out of meetings or completely miss them would not be given
the same tolerance as a nightclub owner could expect.

No, for where Oliver's priorities lay, he'd be better off if everyone thought of him as still mostly
one of the idle rich. Any involvement he had with his family's company kept to much more of a
minimum than his mother obviously wanted.

"Maybe he'll want to, someday," Felicity offered the woman to turn the frown she wasn't even
trying to hide away from her daughter. "Each victory has to be won before we can move on to the
next one."

Moira blinked, but then gave a smile that did light up her eyes a little. "Well said, Felicity," the
Acting-C.E.O approved. Then she titled her head towards a group of older wealthy women nearby
who were probably only at a nightclub at all because of who owned it and they wanted to say they'd been here for the grand opening. "I should say hello to some of our family friends. Excuse me." She left her still more than half-full first flute on the table as she stood.

Felicity and Thea both watched her move off for a moment.

Then Oliver's sister said, "He really would hate it, you know."

"I know," Felicity agreed. "Your mom knows that, too."

"Doesn't mean she cares," Thea snorted, gulping from what little was left in her glass now.

"Different people care in different ways," the Immortal told the teenager. "For your mom, that means making sure you have everything you need. There's nothing wrong with that."

The heiress considered that for a long moment as a new song started up to a handful of cheers from the dance floor below. "I guess..." she allowed, nodding slowly.

Felicity watched her think through it, curious to see what the teenager would come up with next. She only had to wait a moment before her teenage angst gave away to a small smirk that looked at home on her young face.

"So, do you believe in the no sex before marriage thing?"

The Immortal was glad she'd only just raised her glass to her lips as the girl started talking, allowing her to lower it back to the table without taking a sip she might've had to cough or choke down. "Excuse me?"

"You know, the 'won't go to bed till I'm legally wed,' thing?" the young woman clarified, and for a moment the Immortal could only blink at her.

Felicity really had no idea where this could be coming from. She couldn't imagine Oliver saying anything to indicate it. After all they'd only been on one real date, but they'd talked and worked together plenty. Her mouth had let more than a few innuendoes slip out around this girl's brother,
but she couldn't imagine he'd tell her that, either. So where would the teenager get the idea? And why would she ask her brother's new girlfriend almost as soon as she met her?

"Sorry," Thea's smirk fell away, and she suddenly looked worried. "I didn't mean to offend you—"

"No," Felicity shook her head. "No, I'm not offended. Just a little confused," she admitted with a shrug. "We really did just start dating."

"I know, I know, sorry," Oliver's sister shook her head quickly, looking away with a sigh. "It was just something I was teasing Ollie about, I don't know why I actually asked about it," she finished with a wince.

"Don't worry about it," the Immortal told her again, reaching out her free hand to catch the girl's just like Thea's mother had caught hers a little earlier. "Really, I don't mind." Seeing the girl still might try to bolt soon, she finally answered. "And no, I don't believe in abstinence before marriage. I can't promise your brother and I'll jump into bed anytime soon—"

"Please don't tell me when you do," Thea interrupted, wincing again. "I really don't know why I asked in the first place. It was stupid."

"I think it was sweet," Felicity told her, adding when the girl blinked at her in confusion. "You're worried about your brother?"

Thea nodded slowly, "Apparently enough to be meddling in his sex life," she admitted, and grabbed her mother's still half-full glass with her free hand, wincing as she stole a few gulps. "Really, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Don't worry about it," Felicity told her again. "Really." She squeezed her hand again, gently applying just enough pressure to be reassuring, before letting go. "You lost him once. I'd guess getting him back was like a miracle, but it can't of all been easy."

"No, it wasn't," Thea shook her head in agreement. Then she grimaced, "But it wasn't his fault. I mean, all the stupid stuff I was doing didn't help, and Laurel's father hates him for—well, 'cause of Sara." She took another gulp from the glass, then licked her lips before going on slowly. "I think he's happier now. With you."
Felicity nodded, smiling softly. "I think I'm happier with him, too."

The teenager smile softly back. "I'm glad."

For a long moment they just sat there, thinking while the loud music and cheers echoed up around him.

Then Thea sighed. "I've gotta talk to Tommy." She glanced down towards the bar and frowned. "Huh. Wonder where he went."

Felicity glanced down below and was a little bit surprised herself to see Laurel Lance standing near the bar by herself. "He is working," she reminded the teen after a moment. As the youngest Queen had been working at C.N.R.I for a while now, she should have a better idea of what working meant than her earlier complaints had indicated.

"Yeah, that's gonna take some getting used to. And till I do, it's just gonna be weird," Thea sighed again, completely draining her stolen glass as she stood up. "I'll ask Laurel where he went. I've gotta talk to him about something." She didn't speed away immediately, however, though the Immortal thought she probably was usually pretty quick on her feet. She was Oliver's sister. "It was nice meeting you, Doctor—"

"Felicity," the Immortal reminded her firmly.

Thea's smile was real in response, like her mother's had been, only more so. "It was nice meeting you, Felicity."

"It was nice to meet you, too, Thea," the Immortal returned her smile and her nod.

Then the heiress was hurrying towards the stairs to descend down into the club proper.

Felicity finally let herself sigh as she watched the girl go, a little exasperated with herself over how relieved she felt just now. Really, talking to two wealth women shouldn't feel anything like waiting for that unwanted duel last week had, but it did.
How had she forgotten how complicated relationships got? And how quickly it happened? Yes, the whole world seemed faster now, but in some ways it hadn't changed so much. Meeting prospective in-laws would always come with worries, whether it was just before the wedding or only a few nights after the first date.

After the disaster that her last attempt at marriage had been—when she'd fooled herself into loving a man who hadn't been capable of loving her...

Well, Felicitas hadn't made the effort in a long time. It had meant shorter stays in various places—her many different lifetimes, as it were—but it was what had to be done. Staying somewhere too long meant commitment, and for that to be to a career instead of a relationship was a relatively new thing for women.

How western society had relaxed the standards regarding such things, by a lot over the last few generations, was probably what'd led to her letting her guard down a little in the first place. It'd certainly made it easier for her in some ways over the years: one-night-stands, short-lived romances while 'on vacation' or even the handful of summer flings hadn't allowed for any sort of meaningful relationship to form. They'd meant no strings for her heart just as much as they did for mortals. No commitment: no heartbreak by betrayal. Though, looking back, there were a few there she maybe should've made the effort for... but she hadn't.

Not until Oliver Queen had walked into the boring life she'd made for herself and set it alight with his brilliant smile and bizarre requests...

It was a good thing, though, wasn't it, that Felicitas couldn't really say she regretted any decision she'd made so far? Even better: she didn't think she'd come to regret loving Oliver Queen going forward...

She knew his sister was right. Oliver would hate almost everything that came with being the C.E.O of a major corporation. What it came down to, all the other complications aside, was that he didn't have the real mindset for it.

Oliver focused on solving one problem at a time. One arrow after the other. Very rarely did the archer even aim to consider the big picture. The ways all the problems could—and sometimes definitely did—fit together.

It wasn't always easy, but that's what leadership was. Seeing how everything worked and didn't work with everything else. Making the tough choices. Delegating tasks to the right people. And sometimes ruining someone's life if that's what needed to be done.
Modern business wasn't exactly the same thing as ruling a nation of old, but there were similarities. For a C.E.O that meant destroying someone's career: firing someone who failed, or ruining a competitor that would do the same to you if they got the chance. Sending warriors to fight for you, to die for you if need be, and literally destroying your enemies... Well, the two seemed more different on the surface than they really were...

And Thea Queen was right. Her brother would hate almost all of it.

So hopefully it wasn't something he'd have to worry about anytime soon, Felicity rationalized as she finished her champagne. Then she set the empty flute on the table and started to stand: ready to find out why, exactly, Oliver had needed to run off like that.

Before she could actually get up, though, an oddly familiar woman sat down in the seat Oliver had vacated several minutes earlier.

Felicity blinked at her, studying the unmarred lines of the young face—picking up characteristics she recognized from various places, but no certain one. So her heritage must be mixed... which didn't explain why the dark beauty seemed so familiar to her. Not when the Immortal was sure she'd never met this woman before, and yet equally sure she should know her. "Hello."

The unexpected, barely-there Buzz of a Pre-Immortal was almost not worth wondering about beside that familiarity, but it ruled out her being descended from a mortal Felicitas might've met before she was born...

"Good evening, honored one," the woman bowed her head. "I am Nyssa. Daughter of Ra's al Ghul. Heir to the Demon."

Formal introductions were to be expected from the League of Assassins. Once upon a time they were how every first meeting should start. The Game had spoiled that nicety of politeness for Immortals, however, long before such standards were allowed to go lax throughout much of modern society. Mazin, however, would not let it go—and Felicitas couldn't say she didn't appreciate that.

However, despite all her long years of experience and her determination not to show any sort of weakness before the League (something both her brothers—teacher and student alike—insisted upon), Felicity did have to blink in real surprise at the titles the girl claimed. Then she managed a polite smile, "Felicity Smoak, M.I.T class of oh-nine," she spoke only just loud enough for the
woman sitting right next to her to hear over the heart pounding tempo of Steve Aoki's music.

Technically, the woman across from her was the one who should be speaking carefully, since she seemed to speaking the whole truth as she knew it, however impossible a part of that whole might be. But then again, most people didn't pay attention to quiet conversations in nightclubs when there was so much else to appreciate.

"You made amazing time," Felicity said, still at that same volume. "I called, like, yesterday morning."

Nyssa cocked her head to the side in contemplation, her long ebony tresses sliding to the side with the motion, as the earrings that looked a lot like decorated darts (and probably were), did too. "You try, very hard, to change with the times, honored ancient one," she observed in Arabic.

"Those of us who want to truly live have to," Felicity answered in the same language. "Why are you here, Nyssa al Ghul?"

The long lashes looked wrong, and the shape was a little off as Nyssa gave one slow blink, but those dark irises were still familiar. "You called us, honored lady. I am here to answer your summons."

They were Mazin's eyes, Felicity recognized, completely unexpectedly. Impossibly. And she had to stare for a long second as that struck; the eyes of a fellow Immortal in the face of woman who claimed to be his daughter. As entirely impossible as it was plain to see.

"The answers you seek cannot be discussed here," the assassin continued in English after a long moment's pause, seemingly unconcerned with the way the much older woman was staring at her. "Shall we leave?"

"I can't," Felicity focused on each word as she said it, if only to keep her mind from spiraling in impossible circles. "I'm here on a date, actually."

"Ah, yes, with Mister Queen," the assassin surveyed the chaotic dance floor down below, seemingly taking in the very successful opening as a whole as she said, "An interesting choice in lovers."
"He's an interesting man," Felicity agreed just as easily, even though she was frowning. "But he's not why I called."

"No?" another graceful shake of her head. "Yet it is his stepfather whose welfare you ask after, and the death of his bodyman's brother that made you think of us now?"

Felicity hadn't called them about Walter, though maybe she should have. So she focused on the assassination. Mostly because there was something about the way the assassin's attention on Oliver that sounded like more than simple curiosity to her. "I know it wasn't you. And it wasn't any of your warriors either. The killer wasn't League material."

"No. He is not," Nyssa al Ghul agreed.

"And, as far as I know, kidnapping was never really League style either," Felicity observed in reference to the other problem.

"It is not typically, no," the deadly daughter confirmed again.

Felicity almost ignored her phone when it vibrated, but the young woman across from her—while undoubtedly dangerous in her own right—shouldn't be a true threat to an Immortal. Even if Felicity's student had lost his mind, she couldn't imagine he'd order any Immortal decapitated in a crowded club for everyone to see. Furthermore, he wouldn't send a Pre-Immortal he claimed at his own daughter to do it—nor would any of his warriors have falsely introduced themselves to his teacher even if he did want her dead. So she nodded slightly to the girl, "Excuse me a moment."

"Of course," Nyssa accepted instantly, her nod almost another bow of her head.

Felicity could feel her eyes watching as she pulled the device out.

Trouble downstairs. Stay in public.

"Is something wrong?" the assassin asked as the ancient blinked at Digg's abrupt text.

"Probably," Felicity admitted on a sigh, because it wasn't worth the wasted effort of trying to lie about it. She shook her head as she dismissed the message and slipped her phone back into her purse. "Apologies, but I am needed elsewhere. We will have to continue this discussion at
another time," she told the younger woman. Slipping back into Arabic for it, because that was far less likely to be understood by any of the people here that probably weren't paying attention around them. Those that were paying attention and would understand, on the other hand, would also be League, so they didn't matter.

Mazin's daughter cocked her head to the side. "May we be of assistance, honored one?"

Could the Heir of the Demon probably lend a very useful pair of hands here? Yes. As could every one of the contingent of warriors that were undoubtedly here with her.

But Felicity felt bad enough going behind Oliver's back for the information. Both regarding Digg's brother's murder, Oliver's stepfather's kidnapping, and the potentially problematic ties of Tommy's father. She wasn't ready to ask for the League's interference in a situation she was sure Oliver didn't even want her involved in. Not yet. Certainly not before she was sure her student was still sane.

"No, thank you," Felicity shook her head, putting her purse strap over her shoulder and tucking it against her hip as she got up.

The raven haired beauty rose with her. "Are you quite certain?" she asked in earnest.

"I am," Felicity answered firmly, but didn't try to leave just yet. "I'm sure you know where I live."

"We do," Nyssa nodded, also making the transition back into English just as easily again.

Mazin had taught her well: or at least he'd hired excellent teachers for her. Perhaps a bit of both, as it always once was... however he'd happened to find a Pre-Immortal that looked like his late wife with his eyes and hair. If that was indeed what'd happened.

It had to be. Didn't it?

"I shouldn't be here much longer tonight," Felicity told her. "Would you meet me at home later?"

"Of course, 'Ama," Nyssa bowed her head fully again this time. "It was an honor to finally meet you in person."
The Immortal once more didn't let herself react to the unexpected familial address. Instead she nodded back in response. "And you, Nyssa. We should have met long before now, but I have only myself to blame for that. Thank you for coming so quickly."

The assassin bowed her head again, holding the submissive pose a moment longer than she really needed to, then she moved away. She didn't disappear into the club scene. Felicitas' eyes were too-time trained for that. But her graceful form cut through the crowd at just the right pace to go unnoticed by most as any more than a passing beauty in red. Who was joined by a blonde woman in a black dress—undoubtedly another assassin—almost as soon as she exited the V.I.P. section.

Of course, even with her own past experiences and training making Felicitas' eyes sharper than most, she wouldn't be able to not notice Nyssa al Ghul. The barely-there Buzz of the young woman's still dormant Quickening would make her stand out. Her appearance here had only surprised the Immortal because she'd already expected a Pre-Immortal to be here, so she hadn't been paying attention to the sensation until she realized it wasn't coming from the person she was expecting it to.

Another conundrum to ponder, when there was actually time for pondering. As the assassins were, for now, leaving.

It wasn't like Felicitas could simply ask, after all. Somehow that wouldn't feel right. To tell someone, even—or maybe especially—a dangerous international assassin that they shouldn't exist. That their existence was an established impossibility.

It was, of course, more likely that Nyssa al Ghul was adopted. Possible. That was what Felicitas had assumed when she'd received notification from Mazin—twenty-eight years ago, now—that he was a father. It had been the same year his wife died. So really she'd just been surprised he hadn't named the girl he'd adopted after the wife he'd lost, since the two had to be connected somehow. The girl could be the former Bride of the Demon's living ghost, were she mortal she'd have to be related to his lost love.

Not the great love of his mortal life, of course. Sora, whom Mazin had loved while he was still a mortal man, had been murdered centuries ago. Her murder had led to him setting aside his ambitions for science and healing, and instead he'd dedicated himself to becoming a mighty warrior. He would've had to anyway, as he hadn't long survived her—his First Death—and The Game would have found him soon enough after that.

But by the time Felicitas met Mazin, he'd already been known as Ra's al Ghul for decades. The League of Assassins wasn't nearly so shrouded in secrecy back then. Not like it was now.
Though even if it had been, Felicitas didn't doubt that her brother would have heard something of them. He always did. Laid back though he pretended to be, because he liked to be, Methos still kept a careful eye on such aspects of society.

So did Felicitas. These days that was rendered both easier and immeasurably more difficult by technology. Her brother, however, had always been better at it.

Maybe because Methos was more comfortable associating with those that most societies had always frowned upon. Criminals and 'low life's,' as some would call them. Those that made up the underbelly of society, and therefore always knew the worst secrets. While whispers made it back to Felicitas, who'd even called a few criminals friends from time to time, Methos made a point of knowing everything he could about such things. The Watchers weren't the first intelligence organization he'd infiltrated over the years... they were just arguably the most dangerous with what they already knew.

Either way, they had heard about the young Immortal warrior seeking out the man that was once know as Death, back then. That was how they'd met...

...FLASHBACK: 535 years ago...

What surprised Felicitas the most about the warrior standing before her now wasn't that he was here or that he was an Immortal. They'd sensed his approach over an hour ago and known he was searching for Methos even before that.

What she wasn't expecting was the respect in his eyes as he bowed his head. The quiet politeness and calm confidence. All were at odds with the warrior whose quest had had her teacher on edge for days now. Any man who sought out Death, after all, couldn't be seeking anything good...

Well, really Methos was worried more because she was still here. He would've been much happier allowing this master-assassin who'd been making a fearsome name for himself find him if his favorite student had agreed to hide. But she wasn't going anywhere, unless he left again. Then she'd follow. It was a dance they'd played many times. And would undoubtedly play again and again.

Not that she'd intended to be the first once to face this seeker. But she wouldn't back down from his challenge, either, no matter how dangerous his reputation was.
A duel wouldn't be fought here, however. Though a challenge may be issued, for an actual fight to take place they would have to move off holy ground. Which was exactly why they'd been waiting here for the last few days.

"Good morning," Felicitas finally offered, her hands still moving through the wildflowers. "May I help you?"

She wasn't picking the flowers anymore. The ones in her hands were only props, just as they'd been from the moment she'd noticed his approach. Her eyes were paying more attention to the men that were here with him.

All of his shadows weren't coming any closer, and they were all more than far enough away to not be a threat as of yet. Nothing short of a firearm would shoot from across that distance, and not with any accuracy. Regardless, she'd seen the silhouettes of each man clearly enough to tell each one was armed with a quiver of arrows and a bow.

Interestingly enough, the birds were still singing all around them. That wasn't always an accurate assessment of danger though. The little ones may own the skies, but that didn't mean that they always knew whether or not what was down below was dangerous or not. Especially in remote areas like this, where the ruins they'd set up camp in were considered holy ground to a people long dead before the Catholic Church built a monastery amongst them.

"If you would be so kind, my lady," the man bowed his head again, his eyes not leaving hers. "I would request an audience with the one they once called Death, he who led the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?"

Felicitas considered him for a moment, then her eyes went to the bouquet in her, which hid the hilt of the sword she'd laid there when she'd started picking the pretty blossoms. "Even back then he was better known by another name."

"Was he?" the warrior replied immediately, calm and unperturbed by the redirection that did not recognize or refuse his request. Perhaps he wasn't a headhunter then.

"His first name," she confirmed with a nod. "It is not a name he can claim for every life, especially after that, but it was the one his band of brothers knew."

The man was quiet a little longer this time.
So she picked another flower. And watched another shadow move along the horizon.

Then he said, "The Four Horsemen were brothers?"

"Of a sort," Felicitas confirmed. "For a time, at least."

"The stories do not say what it was that finally divided them."

"Death divides us all in the end," she answered evenly, telling the truth in more ways than one.

"It does at that," the man acknowledged, and the hint of sadness in his still polite, calm voice made her look at him again.

He was a handsome man. Perhaps a little past his prime when he first became Immortal, but his Quickening would’ve undone any actual damage there. What stamina age stole away restored by that first brush with death that wasn’t permanent for any of them so long as they kept their heads. That calm patience wasn’t a pretense, either. However he’d come to be who he was today, this was a man that was used to wielding power well enough to know when ill words and ill tempers wouldn't benefit anyone.

"And yet here you are," Felicitas observed, still not trying to rise from where she was knelt amongst the flowers next to her sword. "Seeking an audience with Death." She shook her head. "Some would call that a fool's errand."

He knew she was armed—his calm eyes had paused a moment too long on the exact spot her sword rested—but it didn’t seem to bother him. But then, he was armed, too. Though he made no move to draw the sword he wore on his hip.

"You misunderstand, my lady," the warrior told her. "I seek not my end, but my teacher."

Both of Felicitas' eyebrows rose at that. "Your teacher?"
"Who better to learn from then the oldest of our kind?"

"Who, indeed," Felicitas nodded. "But death does not teach life. Only the absence of it."

The man cocked his head to the side as he considered her words, but before he could reply they both heard the footfall that they were allowed to hear coming up behind her.

"Oh, I don't know, little sister," Methos hadn't been far, after all, and apparently he'd decided to come to her rescue, as always. "Death can teach us all one thing or another."

That he'd come out now must mean the many traps they had in place—just in case this young Immortal and his followers didn't follow the unofficial rules of The Game—were set to spring. Maybe they wouldn't be necessary though.

The stranger's eyes had gone to Methos, making no effort to hide his curiosity, but he looked back at her as she stood up, her sword and flowers both in hand. Instead of reaching for his own weapon as hers became visible, he held up both his hands. Showing them that his palms were callused from long years of regularly wielding a sword, but currently those calluses touched only air. I mean you no harm."

"You'll forgive us our caution, I'm sure," Methos remarked. "Considering your profession."

The man lowered his hands, but still made no move to reach for his own sword. "Death comes for us all. We can only evade it for so long."

"That may be true," Felicitas replied, intrigued despite herself. "But to seek it out for no reason at all is both foolish and careless."

"Yet as I have said," the man replied. "I seek not my end, but my teacher."

"Your legions continue to grow by the year," Methos observed, shaking his head slowly. "You are neither untaught nor untrained, Head of the Demon."

"Wing ta leo wo chey," the man bowed his head again.
Neither ancient had to ask for translation, of course. Though the dialect was dead, Immortals who’d heard it remembered.

"A tale to be told begins thus," Methos shook his head. "Yet your tale has already begun. It has not been so long as mine, or my sister’s, but in the scheme of things that’s far from relevant."

"The will to act is everything, but knowing when to act is worth that much more. Seeking such knowledge when one can yet learn it is, I think, far from any fool's errand."

"Well said," Felicitas spoke up again before her teacher could. Because she knew he didn’t have anything to say to that. Battles of wits with words, after all, were most often her domain. "Yet still you are seeking Death?"

"I seek the man who went by that name," the younger Immortal replied a little more carefully. "I seek to learn what he would teach me."

"When in battle, keep your head," Methos offered blandly.

And Felicitas watched a small smirk form on the strange stranger's face.

"Wise words for any warrior, to be sure." He spread his hands, still not seeming to have any interest in drawing his weapon at all. "I would be honored to hear more, but perhaps we might first end this stand-off before the most fearful here might imagine a threat where there is none?"

Felicitas smiled slightly as she turned to raise an eyebrow at her far harder to please brother.

Methos watching him for several more moments, while the younger Immortal bore the inspection patiently. Then he shook his head, "I do not make the habit of inviting strangers into my home."

The man bowed his head, "As I tried to tell your fair sister, sir, an introduction would be the highest honor."
"I cannot introduce a man I myself do not know," Felicitas told him, smiling slightly. "And I know neither Death, nor you."

"Very true," the smile he offered her was small but seemingly sincere. "Allow me, then, to introduce myself. I am called Ra's al Ghul."

"That is your title, at present," Methos told him. "Not your name."

"In the League we renounce our former life in the name of something new," the man called Ra's al Ghul cocked his head to the side. "Our kind know no father or mother in truth. The families and nations we know are those which we choose, just as our names are. My title and position are my identity."

"They are a part of you," Felicitas allowed, because she knew Methos would never agree—simply because he wanted nothing to do with the Leader of the League of Assassins. "But they do not tell us who you were before. Unless it was this League that found you, and raised you from then on to one day become its leader?"

The younger Immortal met her gaze for a moment, then bowed his head a little more deeply than before. "Few of the nomads that once fostered a foundling in Arabia's sands survived my First Death. Those that did numbered among my followers; some of their descendents follow me still." He hesitated a moment longer, obviously struggling with revealing that which he'd chosen to put behind him because he could see that it was the only introduction they'd accept. "The family that raised me named me Mazin, for the rare rain clouds I was found under were a scarce sight in the desert."

"Then peace be with you, Mazin, son of Arabia," Felicitas offered, because Methos was still busy glaring. "My brother is also a son of the desert, though the nomads who once named him have long since past from history."

When she looked at him expectantly, the older ancient sighed. "I am Methos," he offered nod in response to Mazin's bowed head. "This is my sister, Felicitas, known in her first life as the Queen of Carthage."

"Not a child of nomads or the desert at all then," Mazin bowed to her fully this time—as all the warriors of old once would. "But one of us, all the same. The best of us, perhaps, from what the legends say."
Felicitas blinked at him, but in that space of time her teacher had already moved—and it wasn’t until she was standing behind him half a second later that she recognized the threat that that could imply.

Mazin, however, hadn’t moved though. He hadn’t even stood abruptly from his respectful bow to her. He did so now, with all the slow poise that only a lifelong athlete could claim, and showed them his palms once more. "Truly, I mean you no harm. Nor does any warrior of my League. You are the ancients whom we most honor, both of you."

"You said you were here for me," Methos reminded him. That edge of darkness his voice sometimes took was there now. That tone tended to come out only when he felt he had to shed the more peaceful personality he preferred; returning to his deep down warrior roots because he had to.

Because Mazin—or Ra’s al Ghul as his people called him—had admitted he knew who she was: and if there was one thing her brother had truly tried to accomplish over the ages it was assuring her security in anonymity. It was good to be a myth, after all, because very few people ever imagined a myth like him might be real. Felicitas, however, they never should’ve heard of at all.

Except she was once the ruler of a vast, powerful empire that the world still remembered thousands of years after her city finally fell to Rome.

Before that happened, Alexander the Great had known who she was, and so had several of his generals—too many of his generals, according to Methos. Her brother had done everything he could to ensure that she disappeared from that piece of the world's memory. Though that particular lover was a man whom history would never forget. He remained one of the greatest conquerors the world had ever known—to this day, some would still say the greatest, and would undoubtedly continue to say it for centuries to come.

And in between leaving the city her mother had founded and traveling with a conqueror, Felicitas had been one of the longest reigning Amazon Queen's ever. Only Hippolyta, who still presently reigned on Themyscira, had ever surpassed her and that was only because the Amazons who'd followed Felicitas had gone to the hidden isle with her when it became clear that the safest place for so many Immortal women would be a magically hidden island. Not that all Amazons had gone into hiding, and not all Immortal women became Amazons, either, but that was just one more lifetime her teacher would prefer the world forget.

For her sake.

"I did. For I do hope to learn some of whatever wisdom you would share from your experiences
through the ages," Mazin maintained, bowing fully again. "I have much I would discuss with you both, if you would do me the honor?"

Methos, she knew without even looking at him, would much rather not. But he had to know, just like she did, that running wouldn't help them now.

This warrior—leader of this League of Assassins—had found them once, somehow, so he could find them again. And talking to him now was how they could learn why he was here and what he wanted. More than that, it was the only way they might determine some clue as to what the army he'd amassed was intended to do.

"Your word," Felicitas spoke up when the men were both silent for too long, continuing when the younger Immortal looked at her. "There will be no violence here. No blows exchanged, and no bloodshed. We shall meet in peace, and depart this place in peace, no matter what words are said."

"As you wish, your majesty," the warrior bowed his head again, then surprised her further by drawing his sword and dropping to one knee in one smooth motion, holding the sword up, cradled across the palms of his hands towards them. "I give you my word as the boy from the sands, and my oath as Ra's al Ghul—I shall allow no harm to befall you that is within my power to thwart."

Felicitas blinked at him again, then raised both her eyebrows. "That was not what I asked for, Mazin."

He didn't raise his head as he replied, "Do you accept my oath, your majesty?"

And to that, the woman that'd ruled over numerous nations knew there was only one thing she could say.

"I do. With gratitude," Felicitas bowed her head in acceptance as she always would when she'd sat on thrones before. Then she stepped around her brother—who was still watching the other man suspiciously but made no move to stop her—and silently offered to help him rise.

The warrior accepted her hand in a gentle grasp, not needing any actual help at all as he stood again on his own just as smoothly as he'd knelt, still holding her hand all the while. He met her gaze for a moment, then bowed over her hand. "All gratitude and honor must be mine, great queen."
Felicitas didn't try to pull free, too used to the courtly etiquette even though it'd been ages since she'd let herself rise any higher than the minor nobility of any court. "I am not a queen anymore, Mazin of the Desert. My city fell long ago. And the city by its Roman name now does not even stand in the same spot."

"Yet your empire's reach is yet felt the world over, is it not?" He asked, shaking his head as he went on without waiting for a response. "Power like yours does not fade with time. The wealth and influence of the wise and wary will always remain."

Felicitas cocked her head to the side, still not pulling away even as her brother stepped up alongside her now.

"Is that what this is about?" Methos wanted to know. "Her money?"

"No," Mazin shook his head, and finally released his gentle hold of her hand. "And yes, in some ways." He looked between them, then focused on her again. "I am not wrong to think that there are others like you, no? Other ancients who have influenced the world's events from time to time?"

"Immortals do tend to find themselves involved in history as it is made," Felicitas allowed, not really confirming or denying what he wanted to know.

What he already seemed to know was starting to scare her. No one who hadn't been invited to join the Circle should know of its existence. That was the only reason most of them almost safe from The Game for thousands of years. The shroud of secrecy that was supposed to surround their group—or at least the fact that they were a united group with shared goals suited to actions—was a vital defense against the madness that so easily consumed the young.

And the warrior standing before her now was far too young for his invitation to even be debated, let alone voted upon or issued. He was no ancient. Not yet. Yet he did know about them, somehow. She could see it in his calm, careful eyes.

"The word 'assassin' comes from 'hashishiyya,' which means—"

"Outcast, rabble, or drug addict, depending upon different sources," Methos cut in, the way his wariness wasn't easing at all not really a surprise. Nothing this warrior was saying was particularly reassuring, and her teacher had always said she was too trusting. "Most now would say it means professional murderer these days, though I don't doubt one who professes the
profession themselves might describe it differently."

Ra's al Ghul nodded, "The title has fallen victim to many abuses of language over time. Its real meaning hidden beneath the sediment of lies and falsehoods. In truth, 'assassin' and 'hashishiyah' both mean 'those who stand apart from society.'"

Neither ancient reacted, though Felicitas was sure Methos also recognized what the assassin was trying to imply. By that definition, after all, almost every Immortal could belong to it if they so chose. But so could almost anyone else, depending upon their circumstances and their choices. Felicitas met Methos' eyes when he glanced at her, but still they didn't say anything.

"As I said, we have much to discuss," Mazin offered kindly, then gestured back towards their encampment. "Shall we?"

...END OF FLASHBACK...

That meeting was over five centuries ago.

Back when her deadliest student was still in his first century. Back when his League was still new: a seed sowing roots to eventually grow into the vast international organization it was now. Both a branch of the Circle and another offshoot—another whole plant—all its own.

'We make war that we may live in peace,' Aristotle had said.

It was a lesson that Felicitas never thought the man's most famous student had ever fully grasped. Peace was for the young and old in his mind, and the mortal man the world still remembered as one of the greatest conquerors ever known had died in his prime. He had made war because he was a mortal man determined to be remembered forever, and so he was. The world remembered him, and so did she.

Though the lover that Felicitas remembered—whom she'd known all along loved her for her Immortality at least as much as everything else—was not who the history books knew. Historians listed the battles won, treaties signed, cities built or destroyed, and a great empire that couldn't survive his death intact. She remembered the long discussions, late nights and early mornings. The regrets, as well as the triumphs. The fears just as much as the hate. And his love.

And Alexandros had loved her, in his way. His goddess, he'd always called her. Had Felicitas agreed to marry him that first time he'd asked, she would've been his first wife, and his queen. But
a barren queen would have done the young king more harm than good, no matter how many
admired her. It was better that Roxana be his first wife... no matter how much the insecure woman
had hated Felicitas, or how fast that hatred had snuffed out the conqueror's initial fondness for the
girl.

Roxana's jealousy had turned her into another piece of the political puzzle from the very first move
she made against the eternal being that could remember the mortal king forever. Her constant
attempts on Felicitas life—a few more successful than she could know, like that damn tiger—had
annoyed the Immortal. But they'd hardened the king's heart against the idea of loving anyone else.

Unfortunate, since his second wife, Stateira, and third wife, Parysatis, had deserved better. Both
Persian princesses had both been good friends to her, and she thought they would have been had
they met under other circumstances, as well. Though their husband's love for her, and that
Roxana's jealousy could've otherwise fallen upon them instead were surely factors back then. Both
daughters of Persia had been wise enough to see the futility of making an enemy of Felicitas: who
held Alexandros' real esteem and the respect of his great generals with ease. Of all Alexandros'
Diadochi only Hephaestion had known the truth about her Immortality, but Felicitas had never had
difficult time winning over warriors. Roxana, however, had never been able to overcome her
hatred for 'the favorite concubine,' as she'd only dared to call her when neither her husband or any
of his men could hear it.

Dramatic struggles she'd lived through long ago, but could never forget. Alexandros was not a man
anyone could forget...

His strength had reminded her of Eligius: perhaps more so than any man she'd loved after him, but
they were two different men entirely. That warrior's strength was a trait most of her lovers shared,
and one held by Oliver Queen, too. Actually, Oliver probably had more in common with
Alexandros than any other. The determination, the focus, ever edged by a kind of desperation,
were all facets of character that Oliver seemed to share with the king she'd loved long ago...

All ancient history, of course, save for the reminders. And, more pragmatically, the simple fact that
the conqueror still had a sort of presence in her life. Not because Felicitas never forgot the loved
ones she'd lost, some far faster than ever seemed fair—though that was true—but because of the
'great empire' her brother could never quite conceal in histories mysteries and myths.

How much trouble Methos had had doing away with that aspect of her history from the world's
memory had a lot to do with why she still wondered if her brother had had something to do with
that first burning of the Library of Alexandria, a crime she'd never been able to get him to confess
to. But he'd never denied it either.

The wealth of Carthage, such as it was, might still be a factor today if not for her affair with the
Macedonian. But it was all but irrelevant after him. The sheer might of the Circle, after all, had been built upon—or at least throughout—the empire of Alexander the Great, as he was known in English. So that 'great empire' that Methos couldn't quite conceal in history's mysteries and myths wasn't really the one built by Queen Dido. No, the traces that Ra's al Ghul found of them thousands of years later, despite her brother's best efforts, had been borne much more from the legacy of that lost lover than the original empire Rome had wiped out.

All ancient history now, but of course for the parts of it that weren't. Like Aristotle's famous words that still echoed out of the past. 'We make war that we may live in peace...'

It was an ideal that the Circle sometimes had to live by, but one that Mazin's people embraced. Including, apparently, his Pre-Immortal daughter.

Felicitas had known that Mazin had adopted a child, some years ago. Not long after his second, short-lived wife's death. But the girl that called her aunt wasn't at all what she would've expected... though the Pre-Immortality shouldn't be the surprise it was. Anymore than the fact that the girl recognized her as family from the relationship her father claimed to Felicitas. That of teacher to student as well as siblings by choice.

But none of that necessarily told Felicitas how much Nyssa al Ghul already knew. Did she know that nothing short of decapitation—or utter obliteration as the atomic bombs had horrifically proved—would end her life for good? Was everything about Immortality part of her upbringing as the Demon's Daughter, and was that why she was the one sent to answer Felicitas' request for an audience? Or was she sent because she knew very little about why her father called Felicitas, and others like her, the 'honored ones'?

It was almost fitting, that this meeting brought with it many more questions than answers... but Felicity didn't have time for even the thinking she'd done so far.

Not when something was happening. Digg's text had told her to stay in public, and Oliver probably hoped his abandoning her to his mother and sister would keep her busy for much longer than it had. The party went on, thus whatever was happening here tonight was out of sight...

Because Helena Bertinelli had probably been in the basement before, hadn't she? And so she undoubtedly knew the far too easy security combination—that Oliver still hadn't changed—for his badly hidden hideout...

Well, Felicity had already stayed in public far longer than she'd wanted to anyway. If an unexpected introduction had inspired such introspection, she clearly needed to meditate again
sometime very soon.

Now, however, she needed to head downstairs before one of the Queen women wandered back. Somehow, she’d prefer to risk the insanity of Oliver’s ex, and the archer’s own anger, than that.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa. I wasn't quite expecting this much introspection from Felicity for this scene, but I couldn't resist introducing Nyssa now, and one thing led to another. So there's some more of her past, as well as a little window into the League of Assassins in this universe.

Is the Mazin/Ra’s al Ghul of 500+ years ago the same man that calls Nyssa his daughter, now? Well, even Felicity doesn't know that yet! That scene's one I may go back and change a little at some point, I'm not sure. Some of it I liked, but other parts of it felt forced. That usually means I need to rewrite it after I've finished the story... but we're not there yet.

I almost didn't include her thoughts about Alexander the Great, but they're semi-relevant to the LOA and what Felicity's working through in her own mind. And I really can promise that updates really should start coming faster again. I just updated my other story, so that shouldn't be bothering me for a little while yet even though I'm kind of writing it as the same time as this one. (Only kind of because a lot of this one is already pre-written, so I'm mostly piecing scenes together.)

...  
SPOILERS! (SORT OF)

...  
Referring back to the previous chapter's A/N:
*sigh* Sounds like Laurel's really dead. Apparently. Not 100% sure how I feel about that over all... especially not with her actress apparently moving over to The Flash as Laurel from the other world? Does that make her a villain there? (I admit, I haven't really kept up with that and the other-world stuff is confusing.) Though the Supergirl crossover was amazing... but as it was mentioned there, does Laurel being the Laurel from another world mean the one where everyone's evil? *Is confused*  
Looking forward to what everyone thinks. Really, I am. I LOVE COMMENTS!  
*hint* *hint* *hint*  
LOL. More to come soon!  
Thanks for reading! :-)

~ Jess S
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I have more than one day off in a row right now, it's kind of weird, even though it happens every year. But at least it means I have more time to focus on my fan fics. And to try and get my garden going... though the second one's definitely more of a very prolonged work-in-process at this point... Anyway, enjoy the not-so-long-awaited new chapter! :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*John Diggle's P.O.V.*

John shook his head as he finished examining the twitching hand.

It didn't seem to matter that moving his hand hurt—and it did, Tommy Merlyn winced each and every time he twitched, but—he was too impatient to stay completely still.

"It's not broken," John finally told him.

"My hand or my wrist?" the younger man grimaced.

"Both. Your hand hurts 'cause your wrist is sprained, and your fingers'll hurt for a while, but she really only over did twisting your wrist."

"'Over did it?'" Tommy repeated incredulously. "She tortured me!"

John couldn't help but snort. "She hurt you, yeah. But I wouldn't call it 'torture' in front of Oliver. He's actually been tortured. Has the scars to prove it."

The younger man blinked at him, but his next wince was more pronounced than the ones with every movement of his hand.
"Never mind, I probably shouldn't have said anything about it," John shook his head as if just realizing his mistake; thought it wasn't one.

Hopefully that'd be enough to make this moron realize that his childhood friend wasn't the scum of the earth. That the man not being a partying playboy anymore after he'd gone through hell was at least a little understandable. If he got that far, at least, they could work on the whole vigilante thing.

"Now pay attention," John ordered, nodding down to where he was holding the start of the ACE bandage above the slightly swollen wrist, explaining as he started. "Start here, wrapping down towards your fingers. The point is to stabilize your wrist and your hand. You overlap it each time, wrapping with enough pressure to support your wrist while it heals. You wanna be able to feel your fingers—"

"Oh, I can feel them," his patient griped unhappily, but subsided at the stern look the former soldier gave him in response.

"You wanna be able to feel your fingers the whole time. They should stay warm. Bandage goes across your palm, like this, between your thumb and pointer, and then back up. Then you secure it, like this," He fastened the bandage in place with clips, gently holding on when he would've pulled it away. "Check to make sure it's not too tight by doing this," he squeezed down on one of the fingers that the psycho ex hadn't bent back. "Under the nail'll turn white, but it should turn pink again a second after you release it. Like that. That way you know there's still plenty of blood flow. Got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Tommy sighed as he finally got his hand back, almost unconsciously cradling the injured appendage against his chest again as soon as he could.

The ex-soldier started dutifully stowing the first-aid kit away again, throwing away the excess garbage and putting everything else neatly back together as he asked, "What'd you want for painkillers? Aspirin? Naproxen? Acetaminophen?"

"Got anything stronger than Tylenol or Aleve?"

"Yeah," John confirmed, but immediately shot it down. "You don't need it."

"Excuse me?"
"It's just a sprain, Merlyn. Something over the counter'll take the edge off; that and an ice pack and rest are what you need tonight."

The younger man glared balefully at him for a couple of seconds, then sighed and held out his good hand. "Fine. Some aspirin, I guess."

John tapped the two pills into his palm, waiting till he threw them in his mouth before he gave him the bottle of water he'd just opened. "Might want to drink all of that," he advised, when it looked like he was going to stop after a few gulps. "If you've been drinking, last thing you wanta wake up with is a hangover on top of your sprain."

Tommy finished the bottle off without further prompting, then handed it back with a nod. "Thanks."

"Sure." John glanced at his watch. "It's almost ten now. If you wake up after two A.M with it bothering you, you can take more aspirin. Better not to mix more than one pain-med."

"Yeah, I won't," Tommy agreed tiredly.

"Elevation helps with the pain, too. But if your hand starts to swell, your fingers feel cold, or the pain-level doesn't go down in two days, max: you should see a doctor," John advised, as his limited medical training had drilled into him.

Even though most soldiers wouldn't. Oliver wouldn't either, but maybe the cut-off Merlyn heir would. Maybe.

"And tell him what?" Tommy snorted, raising his hand a little in askance. "I got in a fight with a blender on opening night?"

"You can tell him to mind his own damn business, if you want to," John pointed out. "A doctor's job's to treat you, not judge you."

At the word 'judged,' Tommy sighed, "She asked me if I remembered her? I didn't. I really didn't.... I've been with so many girls, most of them in a drunken haze, but a lot of 'em just blend together.
And Ollie's girls?" he shook his head, wincing as the motion probably pulled at his shoulder. "I mean, yeah, he introduced her just a few months ago, but it didn't mean anything. He was still Ollie to me, even if he didn't want to go out clubbing every night. She was just another girl."

"So when I asked you if you remembered meeting Helena Bertinelli and you said 'sure,' you were lying," John concluded, not really seeing what the cut-off-billionaire thought he had to apologize for there.

"She said something about it being amazing Laurel was willing to date me if I treated all my best friend's girlfriends this way, and I," the younger man snorted. "I laughed at her. Told her a night with Oliver Queen, hell, even a date with him, didn't make her his girlfriend."

John winced then, hoping this wasn't going where he thought it was. "Bet she didn't like that."

"No," Tommy drawled out, shaking his head more gingerly this time. Then he sighed. "And I know I should've headed straight for the nearest bouncer. You warned me, and Smoaky sorta did, too. But..." he shook his head. "Some no one trying to insert herself in Ollie's all around screwed up life like that... that was par for the course back when we really partied a lot. But now it pissed me off. I'm still mad at him, yeah, but it still pissed me off. So I had to rub it in, so she knew how wrong she was, I guess."

"It?" the bodyguard repeated, since that sounded like the most important point.

"That she wasn't his girlfriend." The younger man finished with a wince. "That if she was, she'd be up in the V.I.P section with him and his mom and Thea."

John closed his eyes. "And she saw Felicity?"

"Talking to him, his mom and Thea, yeah."

"Shit." Digg didn't even try to keep it from slipping out.

"She did not like that," Tommy went on, an edge of uncertainty in his rushed words as he hurried them out. "Grabbed my hand, and twisted my thumb behind my back—none of the extra security guys noticed."
"Most of 'em are outside," John pointed out with a sigh. "And the few that are inside are watching the V.I.P stairs, the bar and maybe the doors."

"Still kinda want call 'em on it," Tommy grumbled, before also sighing again. "Only I can't, can I? 'Cause then I'd have to explain all of... this." He shook his head slowly as he looked around the basement that—with all the green arrows—was obviously the Vigilante's lair. "Somehow..."

"Yeah, somehow," John snorted then, shaking his head. "You should be good to go."

"What about..." Tommy trailed off, looking towards the door Oliver and the Bertinelli bitch had gone out a little while ago.

Out into the cold, dark back alley she'd almost certainly crawled in through in the first place, now that the bodyguard thought about it. Damn.

"Don't worry about it," John told him. "Go home. Rest. Ice your wrist if it hurts, no more than twenty minutes every hour. Keep it wrapped; You wanna shower, you can, but try not to use your hand, and re-wrap it right away after. Keepin' it elevated when you can'll help, too."

"But what about Smoaky?" Tommy wanted to know, and it made John like the cut-off-rich kid just a bit more. "Felicity, I mean?"

"We'll keep an eye on the psycho ex," John reassured him.

Tommy looked at him for a long moment, visibly arguing with himself, then he sighed and nodded, turning towards the stairs up to the club. He paused at the bottom. "How do I get out? She punched in a code upstairs?"

"1-4-1," John told him, making a mental note to have Felicity change that as soon as possible.

They should've changed it long before now.
John sighed as soon as he heard the door close upstairs, then got up and walked over to the computer station, not bothering to roll Felicity's chair back yet. They wouldn't want her down here while the bloodthirsty bitch was here anyway.

He quickly perused the screens Oliver had been looking through when he's first arrived, figuring out after only a glance that he'd been trying to find the F.B.I's safe-house for Bertinelli, as extorted, but without success.

Oliver Queen was one hell of a fighter, but he wasn't their tech expert. And the F.B.I wasn't the S.C.P.D. Not that Oliver could hack the local police without Felicity anyway.

John almost turned as he heard the outer door open and close, but didn't bother when he heard only one set of footfalls; the one he'd become familiar with over the last few months that was supposed to be down here.

"Don't say it," Oliver growled immediately.

Before the bodyguard could think of what he wanted to start with about this. 'I told you so,' would be a good place to start, but that was probably 'it,' so he didn't.

"Okay," John agreed as he stood up from where he'd been leaning over the computer desk, and turned around. "Then let's talk about Helena," he crossed his arms when the other man only frowned at him, carefully sitting down on the desk between two of the monitors.

Something Felicity wouldn't allow, but she wasn't here. Hopefully she'd stay upstairs like he'd requested via text a few minutes ago. Though he was a bit surprised that that hadn't brought her straight downstairs.

"Oliver, if you didn't still have feelings for this girl, you would have thought of a different solution than letting her extort you into killing someone."

"So what do you want me to do?" Oliver shook his head, his brow furrowed in resigned worry. "You want me to kill her?"

"I think you would have a long time ago if she looked like me instead of the T-Mobile girl," John immediately shot back. "She's a stone cold killer, Oliver."
"She's not evil." The vigilante shook his head again, looking resigned and exhausted. The kind of exhausted only emotions seemed to do to him. "She's been lost since her father killed her fiancé in cold blood." He frowned at the unsympathetic look that earned. "And are you going to sit there and tell me that you don't know what it's like to want revenge?"

John held his eyes easily, steady and sure in his belief that his hatred towards Deadshot did not make him anything like the Huntress. Yes, if he ever got the chance he would kill the hitman. But he'd never harm innocent people, or even semi-not-innocent people who had nothing to do with his brother dying long before his time.

Were he like Helena Bertinelli, he probably would've gone after the client that Deadshot had been shooting at, that his brother died protecting. Or anyone else that'd been on the detail but failed to take the bullet instead of Andy. But unlike the Huntress, he wasn't crazy.

"What would you do? Huh?" Oliver shook his head and gestured to the open area behind them. "If Floyd Lawton was standing right there?"

"Nothing that'd involve blackmailing you into hunting him down." John replied evenly, confident of every word.

Oliver groaned, "You're right. Okay?" he shook his head. "I can't kill her. And I can't take her to the police and risk her exposing all of this." he finished with a sigh and shrugged. "But at least, if I'm involved, I can contain her, all right? I can minimize the collateral damage."

Minimize was the key word there. Because the Huntress didn't care either way if innocents were caught in the crossfire—and so long as she was alive and armed, it was bound to happen.

The sounds of the outer door being unlocked, followed by heels on cement, stopped him from saying anything he might've otherwise said.

The woman they were arguing about rounded the corner an instant later, "Sorry, am I... interrupting something?" she asked in that smoky, alluring voice that must've hooked Oliver when he first met her.

It just made John want to hit her, and there weren't many women that brought out that impulse in him at all. Hell, the only other woman he could think of that might trigger that instinctive response
was the Triad hit-woman, China White: and that was just common sense for survival.

"We were just talking about you," Oliver didn't deny it.

"And here I thought you didn't care much for me," the brunette smirked at him.

"Still don't," John confirmed curtly.

Oliver spoke up again before the conversation could spiral into any more scathing territory. "I haven't been able to locate the safe house where your F.B.I is keeping your father."

"I can help with that."

The soft voice made all three of them startle, and their heads jerked instinctively towards the stairs that led up to the newly opened nightclub. Or, in the case of the lady stepping off the bottom step, down from it.

John couldn't stop his automatic wince when he saw her. He'd spotted their tech girl earlier, of course, but the sight of her dressed to the nines again—this time for the event going on above their heads—looked wrong down here now.

Felicity fit perfectly up there, where she looked every bit the pretty princess Oliver's mother could be thrilled to be meeting as her son's new girlfriend. In her sparkling blue silk, with sincere smiles and that sweet runaway mouth, she was completely charming. It hadn't been hard to see from afar that both Queen women were enchanted. One brief bright point for this night.

Down here, it was like the fairytale princess had descended into the cold, dark dungeon she should never see. And they even had a wicked witch down here, too... though it was possible he'd been reading his nephews too many fairy tales before bed lately.

"No!" Oliver's explosive reaction wasn't a bombshell at all, not when his bodyguard's gut had momentarily frozen at the thought of their secretive but sweet tech girl anywhere near the bloodthirsty ex-mob princess.
It was enough to jolt John from that frozen second, however, so he started moving towards her—specifically between her and the Huntress—at the same times as the vigilante.

"Go back," Oliver ordered sharply, trying to gesture her back up the stairs before he was halfway to her. "Back upstairs, now!"

The shouted words were enough to make Felicity stop. As both men closed the distance to her, the blonde clasped her hands elegantly in front of her, looking between them and the other woman in their basement silently.

The archer forced himself to take a deep, calm breath once he reached her. "This is a private thing, Felicity."

John, on the other hand, made himself turn away from the couple to watch the psycho ex that was only halfway across the room. His hand was on his gun as he watched the brunette's eyes narrow; knowing she was definitely coming to all the accurate conclusions they didn't want her to, but couldn't stop. But Tommy had ensured she was partway there already, so there really was no fixing it now.

"Please," Oliver added softly a moment later.

"You know I can help," Felicity reminded him in response, her voice just as soft: but not too soft for the Huntress to hear. "That hack would only take me a few—"

"I know," the vigilante cut her off a little too late.

His psycho ex's eyes had already zeroed in on the blonde at her words, so she unfortunately hadn't
"We can't do this that way," Oliver went on quickly. "I've figured out the transport. Digg'll take you back upstairs. Now."

John still didn't turn towards them, continuing to watch the woman that really shouldn't be down here instead. Who's very presence down here was what was wrong.

"Fel-liss-ity," Oliver breathed her name out softly, sighing through the syllables as he tried to persuade her. "Please."

Finally their third team member sighed, too. "All right," she agreed just as softly. "I'll be upstairs. I have my cell, if you need anything—"

"I'll let you know," the vigilante told her, even though it was probably a lie as long as Helena Bertinelli was here. "Digg—"

"There's over three dozen bouncers upstairs." Felicity interrupted this time. "I'll be fine on my own. Digg should stay here. You need him."

Which wasn't strictly untrue. Not when the woman most of that security was intended for was already down here. And Oliver Queen had already proven he couldn't be left alone with her.

Though John doubted Helena would be able to charm the vigilante this time. Not after hurting his friend. Not after threatening his family. Not when he had a real girlfriend now.

But that didn't mean Felicity was wrong, either.

So John stayed put, watching the Huntress as her eyes followed the other woman up the stairs; her steps not completely silent in the heels she was on top of now that they were all silent, though they were quiet enough to explain why none of them had noticed her coming down earlier.

What she was going to do upstairs now was a moot point, really, but John did kind of wonder if she'd brave the V.I.P section—and the two Queen women Oliver had apparently left her at the
mercifully of—again. The bodyguard had seen them as he'd hurried around from the front of the club earlier. She hadn't looked intimidated, or harassed, by the attention, but it didn't surprise him that she'd taken the first opportunity she'd gotten to get away from them. What he wasn't sure of was if she'd taken the opportunity to escape them, specifically, or if she'd just come down here as soon as she could to see what was going on...

Either way, the ex-soldier could see it was going to be a thorn in Oliver's foot later. That she'd drawn attention to herself when she'd managed to come in without any of them hearing her. That she'd called the Huntress's attention to herself...

"How many girlfriends do you have, exactly?" the Bertinelli bitch asked with a sardonic smile as soon as the door at the top of the stairs closed again.

"Like I said, we don't know where the safe house is." Oliver ignored the jibe, but it'd definitely bothered him almost as much as the so-called Huntress seeing Felicity at all had.

After all, he didn't know about Tommy's confession yet.

"What we do know is that the Marshalls service is taking your father to a hearing at the Justice
Department. Tomorrow night." The vigilante paused for just a breath, then admitted. "There's a problem, Helena."

The brunette cocked her head to the side, saying nothing as she waited for him to go on.

"There are two vans," Oliver finished, and added the obvious. "One of them's a decoy."

"Well, good thing there's two of us, then," the Huntress declared with a devil-may-care shrug.

"It's not too late to call this off," Oliver tried, yet again, to reason with her. Like he didn't know better than to reason with a rabid wolf. Rabid werewolf, maybe.

"I think you know me better than that," Helena replied coolly, holding his eyes as she told him, "I don't take prisoners."

John didn't snort only because he knew it wasn't worth arguing with her. That she wasn't worth arguing with.

Oliver held her gaze for several seconds more, before he finally sighed and nodded. "Alright. We don't know where they're coming from," he gestured to the screens he finished. "The best time to strike is after they leave the courthouse. Tomorrow night."

That seemed a little strange to John Diggle. That they were taking the special precaution of bringing Bertinelli in and out for his testimony when the courthouse was closed didn't sound quite right. Didn't sound like something that was normally done, because the courts didn't hold trials around the convenience of criminals or something like that. But maybe the Marshalls could make it happen, and with the real risk of extensive collateral damages being a possibility when the Huntress was in the picture the safety of everyone involved, not just Frank Bertinelli, might make it worth their wild. Maybe that sort of thing did happen and it just wasn't widely known. Or maybe this was a weird sort of one-time thing.

It wasn't like they had Felicity down here to look into it for them. And John wasn't going to have any luck finding more than the vigilante had in her absence.

The brunette nodded her agreement. "Okay. Tomorrow night's a date then," she agreed, before sauntering towards the outer door, giving John an amused smirk when he stayed stationed at the
bottom of the stairs that went up into the club with his arms crossed.

John waited till they heard the outer door slam closed, then glanced toward the security monitors they should probably look at more to confirm she really had left. Which was why he saw her climbing onto a motorcycle that wasn't Oliver's. The bitch had parked there. Right outside. Okay, _that_ definitely had his professional pride smarting...

The vigilante started to pace almost as soon as he heard the door close, and a few moments later he started, "She shouldn't have—"

"She _better_ be the bitch that just left, Oliver," John cut in firmly. "'Cause Felicity didn't do anything wrong."

Sure, he agreed she shouldn't have come down here—that's why he'd sent her a text telling her not to come down here. And yes, if curiosity or worry wouldn't let her stay away she should've still left as silently as she'd entered as soon as she saw Oliver's psycho ex down here. But, in the scheme of things, Oliver really didn't get to throw stones here.

The archer sighed, "Helena knows her face now."

"She already knew that," John told him, going on when the archer frowned at him. "Tommy pointed her out, when Helena claimed to be your girlfriend before she dragged him down here."

It wasn't a surprise when Oliver started snarling out words the ex-soldier didn't recognize. If he had to guess, he'd say they were Russian and Chinese—Mandarin, maybe—and that they were probably all profanity. Impressively, he kept it up for at least a full minute, without even one repetition—a hard thing to do in any language, even if you swore often and weren't angry.

John waited till he stopped and hadn't said anything more for a handful of seconds, then asked, "Feel better?"

"No." Oliver growled and turned back to the computers. "We have work to do."

"Planning Bertinelli's murder?"
"Her father's," the vigilante clarified without looking at him, like he thought the ex-soldier really needed that made clear.

John shrugged, "Yeah, well, I'm kinda hoping they take the vans on the highway. Maybe we'll get lucky and someone won't look before they change lanes; turn your crazy Huntress into another statistic."

Oliver didn't say anything in response.

Right now, they should probably call Felicity back: she was better at research, and better at everything else technological than both of them combined could ever be. But John wasn't about to suggest that before her boyfriend got that arrow out of his ass and apologized. So instead he made himself get to work. Hoping the younger man felt her absence right now even more keenly than he did, because he really should...

Chapter End Notes

OK, I feel like I should say here: I don't personally hate Helena/the Huntress. I find some parts of her character portrayal confusing in the show, but I won't say Jessica De Gouw did a completely terrible job in the role either. And actually, this episode works into my story pretty well now that I THINK I've gotten it all mostly ironed out in my head. That said, I DO think Digg kind of hates her, at the very least on principle, and this scene is from his POV, so that should come across clearly. It was definitely there if you looked for it in the episode. Was it partially because her relentless, uncompromising search for revenge hit a little close to home even before Oliver compared her to Digg & his brother? Probably. But I think it also tied into the fact that she's what Oliver could be if he let himself go there, and Digg doesn't like that Oliver's response to that is wanting to save her by jumping into bed with her instead of putting an arrow in her.

Oliver, of course, feels bad for her. Maybe he even has some real feelings for her. Sort of. But it wasn't until she went after Felicity in the canon that he finally turned on her (and yes, that was kind of perfect in my mind). It works well for Immortal-Felicity wondering if he has a weird attachment to chivalry or something like that, too...

As for Felicity. Well, in canon I think Helena just freaks her out, after being threatened at crossbow-point especially. There's a little bit of dislike there, too though: she DID tell Sara to kick Helena's ass after all, to hell with what Oliver wanted. Immortal-Felicity, on the other hand, can see the situation from a lot of different angles. I'm not going to spoil what it all basically comes down to in her mind, but it shouldn't really be a surprise later on, either.

...OK. Now that I've gotten that out there. Time to actually post this long before any of you are probably expecting it! :-D

Thanks for reading. More to come soon! :-}
Chapter Notes

Well, I almost made the next day. Would have if I'd just focused on editing this, but I kind of got caught up in a later (and much longer) scene. Sorry. It's here now though! Try to enjoy it. :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver Queen's P.O.V.

"She's cute, I guess," Helena's tone was offhanded, but her words felt like ice cubes floating in his blood.

Oliver didn't let himself respond right away, though he knew he couldn't hide everything from the Huntress.

Helena Bertinelli's relentless race for vengeance had destroyed the morals that might've made her try to turn her mob boss father in to the F.B.I in the first place, but neither grief nor rage had made her stupid. Driven, determined, and merciless? Yes. All traits that once made the vigilante think they were alike and could help save each other, until her utterly unreasoning lack of mercy had proven she'd stop at nothing to destroy her father.

If that meant destroying everything, so be it. Something the vigilante should've realized from the start. Helena had, after all, shot up a crowded sidewalk to take out one crooked man in that crowd. After that, it shouldn't have surprised him that she was so willing to start a mob just to bring her father down. It shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. Because she couldn't see all the innocent people who'd be caught in the crossfire, and after it'd already happened to his mother Oliver couldn't not see them.

Helena, however, clearly didn't care. She'd apologized, but she wouldn't take it back if she could. She'd keep doing it, again and again, until she got what she thought she wanted: and to Hell with everyone else. If watching the whole world burn meant her father would be burning, too, Helena would do it. So Oliver couldn't be surprised she was back in Starling, with or without the forewarning Felicity had somehow found for them before this whole nightmare really took off. He also couldn't come up with a way to stop her that didn't involve killing her.

"What?" Oliver finally made himself ask, his tone flat. Not turning to look at her as her heels
clicked over the pavement a few feet behind him.

Helena was pacing. Back and forth as they both waited for Digg to tell them there was movement from the courthouse over the comms.

Or Oliver's comm, at least. The ex-soldier had been utterly unwilling to let him give Helena one. Flat-out refused to even run the op if she had their tech in her ear. The archer couldn't really say he thought the other man was wrong this time. Even if he did: he didn't want Felicity watching over the op and talking to Helena, either, so he pretty much had to let Digg do what he wanted.

"Your new 'girlfriend,'" Helena answered, still trying for offhanded, but with a little too much bite on the designation she might've ended up with if she was willing to let her revenge go a few months back.

In a way, it was probably better off that things hadn't worked out between them early on. With how jealous she'd been of Laurel, whom Oliver had then been making every effort to distance himself from out of respect for both his best friend and his ex-girlfriend herself, he couldn't imagine she would've reacted well to meeting Felicity back then either. Let alone a little later on. Not when he couldn't honestly say there wasn't a growing attraction to the I.T girl even back then; one that definitely might've turned his head if trying to date Helena long-term had become as difficult as it all too easily could have. He honestly still wasn't sure what it was that'd set her off at that unplanned double-date with Tommy and Laurel, but according to Digg the chemistry between him and Felicity had been plain as day for months before they'd done anything about it. So Helena would've seen it, too.

"Or is the computer geek not the only one?" the purple-clad woman snarked, sounding smug. "She's pretty cute, like I said. Useful, too, obviously. But she's gotta be pretty boring."

"She doesn't have anything to do with your father," the archer tried to remind her, even though she hadn't said anything about the former mob-boss herself in relation to the tech genius.

"Oh, I know," Helena agreed, and he could hear the smug smile in her voice like nails on a chalkboard. "But she knows about you. About all of this."

"Marshalls are bringing the vans 'round the courthouse," Digg told him. "No passenger comin' out yet. No guards outside either. Just the two vans backing into the garage."
As expected, because bringing Frank Bertinelli outside to one of the vans would expose him, and even if they'd had a decoy prisoner, too, Helena wasn't above shooting them both. The Starling City Courthouse, however, had several side garages that were built right up against the side of the main building, but completely separate from the public garage that everyone else used every day.

Too many entrances to cover them all at once, so Digg was watching via the traffic cameras Felicity had hacked them into weeks ago. She'd left them one of her 'back doors,' as she called them, just for things like this.

Digg wasn't wrong when he said Felicity Smoak could undoubtedly hack into the courthouse security system for them. Or she could at least tell them how to get into it via some device inside the courthouse; something like that. Oliver didn't doubt that when she said she could hack into what was supposed to be one of the most secure computer systems in the world, she could do it. He was sure she could. She'd already hacked ARGUS, after all, and he didn't think that had anything to do with the likely monitored 'backdoor' Waller had left him access to. Compared to ARGUS, a federal agency that specialized in black-ops and that most people didn't know about, how secure could any other agency be?

But that'd mean exposing her to Helena more, and Oliver was not willing to even consider that.

"Copy that," Oliver answered the bodyguard, not responding to either the unhidden dislike in the other man's voice—directed at the woman they had to help tonight—or what Helena herself was saying. Because addressing either here and now wouldn't help matters. "Movement," he told the brunette. "No one's leaving yet."

Helena heard him, but didn't say anything about that. "I didn't recognize her at first," she went on, attempting offhanded again. "All dolled up like Cinderella."

Oliver did finally turn to frown at her then.

She wasn't looking at him as she shrugged. "Thought your B.F.F might be blowing me off. You know, pointing out your flavor of the week just to get rid of me?"

"She's not—"

"But then I recognized her. I saw you with her." Helena did turn back at him then, one eyebrow arching up sardonically. "Before that, I mean. Jogging in the Glades?"
That made him stop objecting again, remembering he didn't want to tell her anymore than she already knew. Which was too much, and that was before he heard this...

"That a new part of your sidekick training? General fitness till she can play dress up like me? Though I doubt she'll be half as hot as me in leather," the brunette smirked at him. "Maybe that's why you're running? 'Cause I remember better ways to work up a sweat with you, Oliver."

The innuendo didn't make him smile even a little bit. She didn't blush as she said it. Didn't clarify. She meant every word exactly as it sounded. Deliberate, biting and harsh. She wasn't Felicity. At all.

John Diggle was noticeably quiet. The heavy silence in his ear was weighted with all the disapproval, dislike and distrust the former soldier felt towards this woman before the brilliant tech girl was really part of the picture.

"The hoodie's better than the ballgown, I guess. Both of you in green's cute," Helena wrinkled her nose. "Bit desperate though, isn't it?"

"What?" Oliver asked before he could think better of it, the response coming out flat as he stared at her.

"Wearing your color when you run together," the woman in purple clarified. "She could've at least picked her own. Pink, like Barbie, maybe."

For another long moment the vigilante could only stare at her, then he shook his head. "You're jealous?"

"Really?" Digg asked then. "You're just realizing that now?"

"Of your Barbie doll?" Helena snorted derisively. "Don't be stupid, Oliver."

"You can't stop talking about her," he pointed out, studying her even as Diggle's rebuke came over his comm.
"She's right, Oliver," his partner pointed out unhappily. "Don't be stupid. Getting her more focused on Felicity's not gonna help anybody."

Oliver ignored him, still staring at her incredulously as he shook his head. "You're the one that left, Helena."

"Because you saved my father!" the Huntress snapped, crimson lips contorting into a scowl. "I had him, and you had to stop me!"

"I was protecting you," he reminded her.

"By betraying me," she shook her head, sneering at him. "Just remember not to make that mistake tonight."

"Helena—"

"Unless you want one of your friends to find out what a crossbow bolt feels like. Might make Barbie think twice about wearing green."

"Oliver," Digg warned over the comm again, but it wasn't necessary.

The vigilante held her gaze for a moment, then shook his head. "Which garage are they in?" he asked Diggle as a redirect. Because if he tried to speak to the Huntress right away with what she'd just said, he might just aim an arrow he knew he didn't want to let loose.

There were three possible 'back exits' the marshals could use to bring Bertinelli out once he was done inside the courthouse. They couldn't risk getting to close to any of them, because there was no point immediately nearby from which they could cover all three. So Digg was watching on the traffic cam footage Felicity had permanently hacked them into at some point, unhappily waiting to tell them where to go.

"Northeast side," Diggle answered, unsurprised.
Oliver wasn't surprised either. It was exit that offered the closest access to highway. He just hadn't pointed that out to Helena that because he wasn't willing to risk her thinking storming the court house might be a better way to get her father. It'd be faster, but it wouldn't be better. Just a sure way to drop more bodies, and the former mob boss wouldn't necessarily be one of them...

"It's the beta exit," Oliver told her, kick starting his engine and heading off without another word. He heard her engine start behind him, but didn't look back for her the short ride to the alley he'd picked to watch from—once he was sure the marshals weren't covering the street.

Surprisingly they weren't.

The bum sleeping a few feet from the exit point had been there when Oliver had walked by in a ball cap that afternoon, but he was way too out of it to be a fed in disguise: hadn't even shifted when a car had backfired down the block.

The kids walking home from the nearby bus stop hours ago had waived to the woman in the little convenience store calling: 'Hello Miz Thompson!' as they went by, and the same woman was falling asleep on her feet right now.

The plumbers that'd been working in a nearby apartment building had been swearing too much when they came out covered in something that probably didn't smell too good up close. They were the same three guys finishing packing up their truck now.

If Oliver actually cared about this op, and really wanted to make sure Frank Bertinelli was crossed off his list again tonight, he would be bothered by it. Be suspicious at least. But he was just the reluctant muscle right now.

This was Helena's show.

When she stopped beside him again, he wasn't surprised to see she hadn't bothered with the helmet. Obviously she didn't care that the S.C.P.D and the U.S Marshals should both be on the lookout for her tonight. Then again, the mob life she'd despised probably hadn't taught her much about vigilantism and the need for secrecy even when your target knew who you were. Or especially when they knew you were coming.

"I'm sorry," the brunette tried after a few minutes of silence, sounding like she meant it. And maybe she did; right at this minute anyway. "I really did miss you."
Oliver didn't bother responding. He knew giving her the same response she'd shot at him when he'd told her he cared about her wouldn't go over well, and Digg was right. Arguing with her tonight wouldn't help.

So it was a relief when the garage door they were watching started rolling up just a few seconds later.

"Just your father," Oliver reminded her as the garage door finally opened again. "Anyone else gets hurt and I'll put an arrow in you."

"That's sweet," Helena's smirk was clear in his peripheral vision, but he didn't respond to that anymore than he did her more subdued voice. "Now I know how you charmed your geek girlfriend."

Oliver shook his head, but put his helmet on the same time she did. He was more than ready to get this done.

It didn't matter anymore than he knew seeing her father dead wouldn't really help Helena at all. Not now that she'd gone after people he cared about. Not after she'd hurt Tommy. And not with her interest alone in Felicity feeling like the threat that it might very well be.

Knowing his father had killed himself to ensure that his son would live had haunted that son for years. He couldn't imagine how much worse it'd feel if he'd actually, knowingly pointed the gun and deliberately pulled the trigger. No matter what'd happened between them, he couldn't imagine that ever feeling right. Let alone okay.

No matter what he had done, Robert Queen was never Frank Bertinelli. Whatever he'd done that made him say he'd wronged their city, Oliver knew his father would never harm anyone in his family or those they loved. Helena's father had had her fiancé killed. So maybe it wasn't quite a fair balance to compare the two...

But in the end that didn't matter. Helena was the threat here, and helping her achieve her goal was the only good way to get rid of her. With the only reason he didn't want to help her being a regard for how it wouldn't help her in the end, the choice was easy.

And there was an arrow in his quiver that belonged to Frank Bertinelli.
Tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Short and... well, not really sweet. But it really can't be, can it?
Again, to anyone who really adores Helena: I don't hate her. But she really did strike me as very jealous in general. I would've understood her being uncomfortable once she realized that Laurel was the ex that Oliver had talked to her about, but the explosion that followed that realization: turning on him completely and going back to her old plan of starting a mob-war... well, it seemed a little over the top to me. Even as I'm trying to understand all the painful emotional places her character's rooted in for the show... Then we have her returning to be faced with the Canary. And if you read her return in the comics she's nice to Felicity, but there's jealousy then, too. It's just struck me as a dominant facet of her entire personality. So it's here, too. Hope it wasn't too painful for anybody.
And yes, I know this is very short for me, but a bunch of the next few scenes kind of came together like this. So at least it means you don't have to wait as long between updates!
As always, comments are appreciated! Thanks for reading! :-D
Tommy blinked in surprise as he entered the club's spacious dual-desk office. He couldn't help it; the golden-hair on the other side of the desk didn't belong to the lying best friend he was expecting. "Smoaky?"

Oliver's girlfriend glanced up, a kind smile lighting her face right away as she looked at him, her eyes pausing on his mummified limb for barely a blink before she was meeting his gaze. "Tommy. How are you feeling?"

He flinched automatically at the question, protectively cradling his still hurting hand at the reminder.

"Sorry," she said before he could force an answer. "You'd probably rather not think about it. But did you go see a doctor?"

"No," Tommy shook his head slowly. "It's fine. I'm fine, thanks."

The blonde raised an eyebrow, "You're not a very good liar, are you?"

Tommy blinked, "Excuse me?" he asked, closing the door because having it open was enough of an invitation for some club goers to drop in and he'd rather not deal with that even if they weren't going to talk about what he thought they might.

"Your wrist is hurt. Something happened to it. Otherwise it wouldn't be wrapped up." She shook her head slowly. "It's always easier if you don't lie about the stuff you don't have to."
Tommy eyebrows drew together as she glanced back at the computer she was using. One he'd never actually seen Oliver on, come to think of it, but that wasn't all that surprising. That the tech-girl was holed away here in the office, with the club owner she was dating was nowhere to be seen was the surprising part.

"And if you're embarrassed about being beat up by a girl, I can show you the police reports on all of the people she's killed." Felicity said like she was talking about yesterday's weather, then she wrinkled her nose. "Don't know you well enough to know if that'll make you feel better or give you nightmares, but either way I'd recommend not looking at some of the pictures."

Tommy grimaced. "Oliver told you what happened?"

"Not exactly," Her pink lips twisted a little into an almost grimace. "I think he's giving me the silent treatment right now."

Tommy blinked. "For what?"

"Giving a damn."

He blinked again, then shook his head. "Then how..." he trailed off, really not sure how to ask.

"Who do you think set up the security system here? And everything else in your digital setup?" Felicity raised one eyebrow at him, before her eyes darted back to the monitor for a moment. Then she shook her head and looked back at him. "Well, he sort of had one already, but even he knew it sucked."

"Thank you," Tommy decided on a nod, then tried again, "But you know who did this?" he asked, holding his injured appendage up.

"I did warn you about her. Digg calls her Oliver's psycho ex-girlfriend?" Felicity cocked her head to the side. "But they only went on handful of dates, so I don't think she deserves the last designation. The first one's a definite though."

"Can't argue with that." Actually, Tommy found that statement very easy to agree with. He studied
the blonde for a long moment, while her eyes remained on whatever she was watching on the monitor, then he finally asked, "Oliver's..."

"Doing something stupid," she didn't hesitate to fill in the obvious blank.

That didn't tell him much, so Tommy waited for her to explain more. When she just kept watching the computer screen, he started walking towards her, pausing when she glanced his way, but then continuing around the desk as her gaze went back to the monitor without a word of protest.

It looked a little like the club's security feeds, which he hadn't actually looked at yet. Maybe he should; maybe last night shouldn't be put into storage, opening night or not? Then again, this was the woman who'd just admitted to setting that system up, so she was probably the one to ask. Even though what she was watching was definitely not normal footage from the club.

It kind of looked like bad footage from an action movie: like the chase scene. Only instead of cops there was a motorcycle chasing a van—or was it two different motorcycles and two different vans? Must be, 'cause otherwise they were definitely in two different places at the same time.

Either way, it pretty much answered his question of whether or not she knew what'd happened last night under the club. Because why wouldn't Oliver tell his girlfriend?

"He's helping her?" Tommy knew the incredulity in his voice was stupid even while he was asking it, so he grimaced as he said, "He said he would."

The memory of Oliver pleading with the woman that'd attacked him last night came back without any effort at all.

"Helena! This isn't you!"

It hadn't even crossed Tommy's mind to call for help when he still could have. When she'd grabbed his thumb and twisted his whole arm around behind his back, he'd cried out but no one could've heard him over all the loud music. And somehow drawing attention to himself and a crazy woman who knew the code to get into the basement hadn't seemed like a great idea. Doing what she said and handing over the note she gave him to send to Oliver, which had all but confirmed for him who she was, had seemed like the best thing he could do at the time. Because there was more than enough crazy in those eyes to convince him that she wouldn't mind pulling out a gun and shooting up their club on its opening night, and even if that'd been a bluff, drawing any attention to the whacko-woman would've demanded the question of why she was attacking him in the first place.

And after fear had fooled his eyes into seeing someone who couldn't be there--had made him think the only person who noticed what was going on was a woman who'd been long dead--Tommy had
decided just doing what the bitch was telling him to was the best thing he could do if it got her away from everyone else. The brief, impossible sighting of a woman that could only be a ghost was honestly a lot scarier than the crazy live one who was hauling him off the dance floor...

It'd all seemed to work, too. The madwoman hadn't even pulled a gun once they were both waiting for Oliver downstairs. But she had bent his arm even further up behind his back, twisting his wrist at an odd angle and forcing him to bend over the table facing the stairs as soon as the door at the top of those stairs opened and the man they were waiting for came down them...

Still, why Tommy was seeing ghosts in the second life-or-death situation he'd found himself in, in just as many weeks, was a bit scarier than the pain itself...

"My father is a mobster and a murderer. It's not like you haven't killed men like that before!"

Put like that, Tommy couldn't say he understood why the vigilante gave a damn about the whole thing. Why he hadn't put an arrow in her dad already, since that was what he did to criminals in Starling City. But maybe that was the pain talking—he'd been a little worried she might twist his hand all the way off at that point.

"And I tried to teach you to obtain your objective without killing!" Oliver had shouted back at her.

"By applying leverage..."

Tommy could hear that the woman was sneering as she said it, even with her standing behind him and completely out of sight.

"Be exploiting someone's weakness..."

Then his hand was definitely being twisted off or his fingers were being broken, or both, and nothing else mattered more than that. Screaming in agony didn't make him feel better, but he couldn't stop it either.

"—of leverage above our heads right now," the woman was snarling when he could hear again. Her voice went soft suddenly a second later, pleading. "Please, Oliver. Don't made me do something that both of us will regret."

Tommy tried to look at his friend then, when both of them were quiet for what seemed like a week in heartbeat, but his eyes snapped close on another scream when it suddenly felt like she was tearing his finger off again.

"—kay!" Oliver's shouted agreement echoed through his eardrums, around the pounding pain and the memory of his own screams. "Okay. You win. I'll help you. Now let him go."

Tommy hadn't dared to move, he was struggling a little just to breathe as he waited for the woman to obey.

Oliver obviously thought she was taking too long, too, because then he was growling the words out more aggressively. "Let... Him... Go!" he sounded like the scary man under the hood that the city's corrupt had come to fear then.

And finally, she did let him go, thank God.

Well, Tommy did for a moment anyway, but then everything was just pain again and trying to breathe, never mind move...
"Of course he did." Felicity replied, her calm words bringing him back to the office. "She knew how to hurt him."

Tommy shook his head. "She hurt me."

The blonde met his eyes again for a moment, then nodded. "Exactly."

Tommy stared at her, not sure what to say, so he only watched while she sighed.

"Of course, that was a day after he found her chatting with Thea back at the Mansion."

Tommy's eyes flew wide, "What?!" he demanded, his heart all but leaping into his throat at the idea of that crazy bitch anywhere near Speedy.

The teen was trying to get her life in some kind of order, and even if she was still the party girl that didn't want to give a damn about anything but the next rave, she couldn't deserve anything her brother's psycho-ex might dish out. The bitch had already almost killed Missus Queen; how Oliver could ignore that, whether his mother was the intended target or not, his childhood friend didn't understand. Then again, Tommy's own mother had been murdered a long time ago and there was no bringing her back...

"She's fine. Remember, you saw her last night?" Felicity reminded him, shaking her head. "That was just a threat. She's smart enough to realize Oliver would kill her if she hurt his baby sister."

The blonde gave him a small smile, "Unfortunately, she also realized that just hurting you might still keep her under his code of chivalry."

"Chivalry?" Tommy blinked, completely thrown by the word itself, never mind what it actually meant.

"Obviously he slept with her. Digg thinks that's why he won't kill her now." Felicity shrugged. "Personally, I think Oliver's a bit more complicated than that. We all are."

"Then why..."
"He thought he could help her," the blonde shook her head. "By the time he realized he couldn't, he'd already made her into a more effective killer who knew too much."

"Then why didn't he just..." Tommy winced as he trailed off, unable to actually say it.

Felicity glanced at him. "Kill her?" she sighed, her eyes going back to the screen again as she asked, "Do you think you could?"

Tommy blinked, staring at her a little because she sounded like she was talking about the weather again. "I'm not..." he shook his head. "I don't know how."

Felicity was still watching the monitor as she answered, her voice so steady she might be talking about the plot of some stupid show's most recent episode. "It doesn't take training to kill someone, Tommy. Sure, it helps. But just the wrong circumstances can be enough. Doesn't even have to be that. Just the choice to act, to kill, when necessary, can see it done." Her blue eyes came back to him, looking a lot darker than the warm sunshine he'd come to expect of Oliver's new girl. "If you had a gun in your hand while that madwoman was aiming her crossbow at Laurel, do you really think you wouldn't point and pull the trigger?"

"I..." Tommy swallowed, no happier with that mental image then he was with the idea of the madwoman anywhere near Speedy. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I would." He nodded, clarifying softly, "For Laurel."

"Of course you would. You love her." She said it matter-of-factly, like it was as simple as that.

Then again, in the scenario she'd just described, it really was.

"Damn it." Felicity frowned at one of the screens.

One of the van's was motorcycle was speeding away.

The van it'd been chasing was stopped in the middle of the two lane road... it's rear doors wide open?
"What's wrong?" Tommy asked her while he tried to make sense of it himself, then his eyes widened without any explanation from her.

There were cop cars converging on the stopped van—coming at it from either side of the tunnel it'd been forced to stop in—lights flashing, sirens probably going, too.

"It's a trap!" he realized.

"Yes, Admiral, it is," the blonde acknowledged dryly.

Tommy's eyes went back to blinking at her as she raised her cellphone to her ear.

"Digg? Call them back, both of them, the S.C.P.D..." she trailed off, then scowled. "What do you mean he turned the comm off?"

Tommy glanced between her and the screen, blinking when he saw the remaining van was now spewing smoke from the front as it swerved to a stop.

The rider of that motorcycle dismounted and lost her helmet. Revealing the long brown hair of the bitch that'd nearly broken his wrist.

"Well, call him then!" Felicity demanded of Oliver's bodyguard. "No, he won't answer if it's me."

On screen, the brunette was pointing something—her crossbow, Smoaky had called it?—at the back of the van. Shouting something...

A second later the van doors flew open.
The bitch took a step back in obvious surprise.
And that was before the cop cars closed off both ends of the tunnel she'd stopped the van in, the S.C.P.D surrounding her.

Oliver had stopped the van in a tunnel, too, come to think of it. What was the point of that? Why not stop the van outside the tunnel so you couldn't be trapped in it yourself?
"It's too late for him to help her, Digg," Felicity sighed. "The S.C.P.D have her." She shook her head. "I'll be downstairs in a minute. Make sure he doesn't do anything stupid..." she trailed off, obviously listening as she nodded in response to whatever the bodyguard was saying. "Yeah, like that."

Tommy glanced between the blonde and the monitor, where they could see the brunette surrendering, surrounded by cops with guns all around. He waited till she'd hung up before he asked, "I'm sorry, how's this a bad thing?"

Because the psycho bitch behind bars for the rest of her life—unable to break anyone's wrist or shoot crossbows at anyone—seemed like a great idea to him.

Oliver's current girlfriend was getting up from his desk then, which now looked like it normally did, he realized: all the weird windows and car chase stuff gone. "Because," she answered with a sigh. "He's going to want to save her."

"From the cops?"

"Um-hum."

Tommy stared after her for a moment, then followed her out of the office. "Where are you going?"

The blonde stopped at the top of the stairs, as if frozen for half a second, before she turned back to him with another smile. "I have to make another call, but I'll be heading downstairs—downstairs, I mean—soon if you want to join?"

Tommy nodded immediately, and tried not to think about whether or not it was strange that he did want to go down there again...

"Great," Felicity's smile got brighter, looking like it could light up the room all on its own. "How 'bout you head down then, and I'll be there in a minute?"

It took Tommy almost a full second to realize she wanted him to go away because she didn't want him eavesdropping on her phone call, which was fair. So he quickly nodded. "Sure, yeah. I'll be down there."
"Thanks," Felicity started walking along the edge the empty V.I.P area's balcony, already dialing her phone. "This'll only take a minute," she said again over her shoulder, which was probably another cue to head down the stairs.

A part of him wanted to stay, to try and listen since whatever call she had to make right now because it almost had to be about the unfolding disaster of the night. But this woman had already been going out of her way to be about as helpful as she could be to him, much more so than he—or Ollie, even—probably deserved. So it hardly seemed right to try and eavesdrop no matter how curious he was.

It wasn't like she'd be doing anything she wasn't going to report to the vigilante himself once they were all downstairs, and Tommy had just committed to being there for that. So he only glanced at her once as he made his way down the stairs, and her back was to him, so also he could make out was that she already had the phone tucked to her ear. From the way she was standing he'd guess that whoever she'd called had picked up right away, because it didn't look like she was listening to it ring or waiting for the beep to leave a message.

Tommy shook his head, silently rebuking himself for giving into his now more suspicious than ever curiosity; even with this woman who'd been nothing but helpful to him when she didn't have to be. He knew it wasn't fair, and he should save all those suspicions for the best friend that clearly did keep countless secrets...

Felicity's heels coming down the V.I.P stairs not even a whole minute later—just like she said—were still a relief to hear then. His thoughts weren't the best place to be right now, so he'd rather be distracted by anything at all. If it was something that'd satisfy his curiosity somewhat—as what looked like a coming confrontation between Oliver and his new friends might just do—all the better.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I wasn't really planning on bringing Tommy back with his own point of view so quickly... but it just kind of fit. I thought so anyway. It definitely provided a different perspective, after all, while still clearly displaying that Felicity's version of 'going away' here was just to go up to the office Oliver never used (seriously, did we ever even see it before it was Thea's in S2?) and hack into the Foundry's network from there... or just log in, since it's her network, really. Of course, that's not all she was up to here, but that's all Tommy could clearly see, so... Anyway, there's another short update! Like I said before, they're probably going to be like this for a while yet. Staying in one POV for most of the upcoming scenes just doesn't seem to work for my muses here. More to come soon! (May be a bit more of a delay, because I'm trying to get the next chapter of Butterfly Call Chaos ready, too,
but either way it shouldn't be too long.)
Thanks for reading. And, as always, comments/etc. are always appreciated! :-D
Chapter Notes

Okay, so I didn't update the Jurassic Crossover yet. It should happen soon, but this was one of my favorite pre-written scenes for this story, so final proofing/tweaking/editing, etc., kind of drew me in. Hope you guys enjoy it, too! And the next scene for A Butterfly Called Chaos is almost done, so that one definitely should come up before the next one of this story. Sorry to those who don't care about dinosaurs and want to see what's happening here more, by some of my muses have come out of hibernation now, so hopefully there won't be any really long waits for a while.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver Queen's P.O.V.

Oliver almost turned right back around as soon as he rounded the corner into the main area coming in from the alley entrance. He'd been expected only Digg's disapproving frown and crossed bowling-ball arms—both of which were present—but the other two people waiting for him were a surprise. He made himself keep going, nonetheless; heading for the gear station even as he asked, "Tommy? What are you doing here?"

Somehow the childhood best friend that'd recently learned he was The Vigilante seemed like a safer bet than either of his unhappy partners. Because he already knew what Digg was going to say, and the fact that Felicity hadn't turned from her computers when he came in didn't make Oliver think talking to her right now was a great idea either.

"Here for the show, I guess," Tommy shrugged, wincing as the move made him his hand hurt. "So helping the crazy chick didn't go well, huh?"

Olive ignored the undertone of sarcasm that said that wasn't a surprise as he answered, "The entire thing was obviously a setup by the S.C.P.D," he sighed, then he shook his head. "They have Helena in custody. I have to go," he said as he grabbed the smoke grenades and gas mask he'd had to stop here for, making himself go on even as he searched for the right filter in the setup case.

The arrows he had for this, after all, wouldn't be enough for openly invading a police station—not nearly enough smoke—and he didn't carry the mask around all the time, either. And he needed both, because he needed a lot of smoke. Needed the cover; because he was not going to start killing cops tonight. The silence was quickly starting to feel heavy again—broken only by the faint,
strangely slow sounding clicks from Felicity's keyboard—so he went on as he started fitting the right filter into his mask.

"They'll be at the station by now. Breaking her out of there's a lot easier than Iron Heights. I couldn't stop them on the way there—"

"Without killing a bunch a cops, yeah," Digg interjected before he could say it any other way; likely not wanting to let him wander back around to the argument they'd had by comm as soon as he'd turned his back on the scene of Helena's capture. Then again, if that meant the former soldier wasn't going to carry on with the short rebuke he'd given him about cutting comms during the chase, going on about all the benefits of open comms or something like that, that was fine by him.

"Why are you even helping her?" Tommy wanted to know, the angry accusation in his eyes like a knife. But it was one the other man had every right to wield.

"Tommy..." Oliver sighed, grimacing as he started loading the new gear up to go. "Sorry, I don't have time to explain—"

"Yes, you do." Felicity interrupted this time, turning her chair around to face him for the first time since he'd come in tonight.

This was the first time since he'd seen her since he had sent her away last night, because she hadn't answered her door later that evening. Not that he'd really expected her to. Once he'd been sure she was asleep in bed, safe, sleeping in his car outside hadn't been impossible, just uncomfortable. Though he'd been more than a little unhappy when he'd realized she'd left for her morning jog out the back door and deliberately taken a very different route from normal so that it took him almost twenty minutes to find her after he'd realized she'd left. Still he'd known better than to yell at her for it then, instead keeping his distance for the remainder of the route back. She'd known he was there, he was sure of that just from all the unnecessary twists and turns she'd thrown in there that'd made following her from a distance so hard. But she'd never slowed down or stopped to let him catch up: her sneakered feet pounding the pavement a lot faster than the normal leisurely run they'd started to make a habit of once he'd realized she really did normally jog too close to the Glades and wasn't going to stop doing it... all of that wasn't something he could talk to her about right now though. Even with Helena's snide comments about their jogs still cutting a route through the back of his head.

"Why are you doing this?" Felicity asked him now, her gaze locking with his while he frowned at her. "Helping her?"
"Fe-liss-ity..." Oliver sighed her name, because he couldn't growl it. "I don't have any choice!" he growled that, and gestured around them. "She knows everything!"

"I doubt that," Felicity shook her head far too calmly. "You two dated for what? A week? Maybe a few days more?" she raised an eyebrow, "I may not rush into relationships like she does, but I've known you—known about all of this—a lot longer than that, and I'm sure I don't know everything."

"That's not..." Oliver sighed again, and shook his head. "She knows I'm a vigilante, Felicity. The Vigilante."

"Yes." Felicity shrugged. "The police accused you of that before. Arrested you, even." She tilted her head this time, as if looking at him from a different angle would make their different views align. "That video you planted for them was better proof than a madwoman's word could ever be. A madwoman you took on a few dates. So any lawyer could easily paint her as a jealous ex without even paying too much attention to her obvious lack of sanity."

"No," Oliver shook his head, scowling. "I can't be accused again, Felicity. Last time it was only a few days before a hired gun came after me." He grimaced at the memory. "Who's to say they won't go after my family instead?"

"The S.C.P.D won't arrest you again, Oliver. Not on Helena Bertinelli's say-so." She responded evenly, sounding perfectly reasonable. "I can't imagine the D.A was happy with Detective Lance last time, but they'd have to crucify him if he did it again without concrete, absolute proof. Which, I'll say again, your psycho ex-girlfriend's word is not."

"He brought her here," Digg put in from where he was watching them with crossed arms. "Even gave her the password." Felicity grimaced. "Yes, that's why I changed it just now, which—just F.Y.I; we should do a lot more often anyway. And a reason to set-up another base just in case."

"Wouldn't help us here if the police got a warrant," Oliver objected, because almost everything down here had to belong to the vigilante.

"On the homicidal, jealous ex's say-so?" the blonde shook her head. "If that's all you're worried about, we should just start moving out. There's plenty of warehouses nearby that'll let you pay all
in cash and not ask any questions—or even want a real name. Give Digg a good disguise and some cash and there'd be almost no way for it to be connected to you." She paused for a breath, then added: "That's assuming you don't already have a second secret base?"

Oliver's face twitched. Because yes, he did. But he was still frowning. "The accusation alone would put my family in danger, Felicity. And you. All of you," he nodded towards Tommy and Digg, but kept his eyes locked with hers. "Forget the police task force that would be focusing on us. It'd get out that they were. If corrupt businessmen didn't start hiring hitmen right away, the Triad would still come after me just on principle."

"Principle, right," Felicity snorted, rolling her eyes. "I'm surprised you haven't already had that problem. Especially with your club."

"Hey now," Tommy objected, but he didn't say anything else. Likely didn't have any idea what to say.

Oliver blinked because he didn't know what she was getting at either. "What's wrong with..." he trailed off, and shook his head. "The club's a perfect cover."

"In theory it is. Definitely," Felicity nodded, before she rolled her eyes again. "Then you went and named it 'Verdant' to justify the green theme. And the 'V' in your sign? In all the signs? I mean, are they supposed to look like arrows pointing down?"

"What? No!" Oliver denied straight away, even though she'd hit very close to why he'd picked the name he had for the nightclub. He didn't think it was that obvious. And the V's just looked like V's... didn't they?

Diggle snorted, but didn't otherwise inject his smirking self back into the conversation he was still just watching with his arms exactingly crossed.

Tommy, too, stayed silent, though he was blinking like he was also only now making the mental connection to the imagery all around the new club as she drew it out for all of them. The few parts of the club's decor that Oliver himself had picked.

This time the brilliant woman's sigh sounded so tired Oliver wanted to refill her coffee cup for her, like had had more than a few times when she came here after all day at work, to help him through most nights. And that was before he'd really realized exactly how much and how hard she did work
before she ever set foot in the Foundry each day. Never mind the days that started with them still here long after midnight, when she was headed home for barely a catnap before heading in to work while he and his bodyguard were still catching some shut eye. But tonight was the first night the vigilante could remember seeing her computer station without one of her coffee mugs on it for him to consider refilling, and he really didn't have the time to be arguing about any of this, let alone making coffee.

"Oliver, I know you tried to fix the timing problem. That that's why you had yourself arrested a few months ago. And all things considered it mostly worked, but it's not enough."

"Felicity—"

"No, Oliver, listen to me. Hiding all of this," she gestured around them, and he couldn't help but be a little relieved that even that wide gesture didn't make her wince anymore. "It isn't just the timing. It's not just one time. It's all the time. Every day. Everything you do."

"I know that, Felicity—"

"No! No, you don't!" Her golden ponytail whipped around as she snapped her head from side to side. "You might think you get it, but you're only looking at what's right in front of you. You're not seeing the big picture. Any of the big pictures."

"What'd you mean, Felicity?" Digg spoke up, his disciplined calm almost hiding his concern while Oliver tried to let the same dark emotion make him scowl at the earnest genius.

His tech-girl closed her eyes, looking so tired he thought again of how much she worked. Too much. He'd want to send her straight home to bed, but that wouldn't go over well even if they weren't already arguing.

Then she took a deep, slow breath, before her lashes went back up and her big blue eyes met his again. "Oliver, what sort of profile do you think the police are working with on 'The Vigilante'?"

"Modern day Robin Hood," he answered, tone turning a little sour all on its own.

Mostly he'd been able to ignore the comparisons. With all the similarities even he could see: the bow and arrow, stealing from the rich to give to the poor, and the same color choices, he probably
should've expected it at some point.

To Oliver, though, it was *Shado's* hood, formerly her father's: Yao Fei's. Camouflage on the island that'd been lifesaving more than once, and a still useful disguise for him in the city, yeah. But he'd chosen to use it, to wear it, to honor both of them and everyone else he'd lost on the painful path from the clueless playboy to a man trying to finally fulfill his father's dying wish; to save his home and right his family's wrongs.

That, all of it, had nothing to do with some thief that'd probably always been more stories spun to entertain than any one real person had never come close to Oliver's thought process—let alone crossed it. At least not until the media started saying something about it just about every time they reported anything at all about him. Be it a statement from the S.C.P.D or something dug up by some resourceful journalist after they'd gotten a 'no comment' from the cops, or some variation of both mashed together. Like his wearing a hood and aiming arrows at anyone had to be compared to the guy whose men had to be beyond drunk while they sang merrily about wearing tight tights in the woods...

"Okay." Felicity nodded. "That was probably something that came up with Adam Hunt. Well before the media started running with it. That was almost six months ago. A month after that, they arrested you, then they had to let you go with apologies." She raised an eyebrow, her eyes still unwavering when he looked back at her. "What have the S.C.P.D learned about you since then?"

Oliver finally let himself scowl. "Detective Lance can't—"

"He's one man. The man in charge of the task force, yes. And yes, your trick probably made him doubt his judgment when it comes to you as Oliver Queen. Considering your history with his family I don't get how he was allowed to stay the lead detective on the case while investigating you. A lawyer's dream and a prosecutor's nightmare in a lot of ways—he's really lucky you didn't decide to press charges yourself. Though that might've kept attention you didn't want on you. But he's not the only one looking for the vigilante."

The archer certainly did not want to talk about Laurel or Sara, or anything to do with the Lance family right now. He wouldn't want to even if Tommy wasn't watching—or contemplating his hurt hand just to not be uncomfortably watching. So he focused only on the last part with a nod. "I know your neighbor's—"

"It's not just Nick. Or McKenna Hall, or Lucas Hilton either. There's two more detectives working the case with them and Lance. Six S.C.P.D detectives actively working to find you. Full time. Nonstop. Every time you put an arrow in anyone, the autopsy report is copied to all of them. And most of the thugs or drug dealers you intimidate in the Glades might not file police reports, but they could be someone's C.I. The white collar crooks? Some of them might not report their terrifying
encounter with you, but many of them will. More since the thing back in December wasn't you."

"What's your point?" he ground out. Still wanting to head for the door sooner rather than later, but knowing deep down this wasn't a conversation he could just walk away from. Did it really have to happen now though?

"My point is almost every time you cross someone off your List? That name gets added to the S.C.P.D's list for you." The genius shook her head so sharply it looked like her hair was alive again as she threw her hands wide. "Everything you do, each time, gives away something about you. And there are a lot of people thinking about all of that, so you can't afford not to."

"I know that, Felicity," the vigilante sighed.

"Do you?" she cocked her head to the side to look at him.

"Yes."

The blonde nodded as if accepting what he was saying this time. "Then explain Helena Bertinelli to me."

Oliver couldn't help but deflate at that. "I thought I could help her. I was wrong. But now she knows too much—and I can't kill her. Or leave her in cuffs to talk."

They'd all talked about all of this already—minus Tommy. In bits and pieces apart more than together. With mostly censure and crossed arms from Diggle; and softer frowns and concern from Felicity. Tommy was the one this was all new to, so that was probably why he was just listening to everything while the other two went after the archer. From Digg he'd expected it, and he couldn't say he didn't deserve it from Felicity at this point, too. But what else could he say?

"Because," Felicity nodded deliberately. "The viability of her testimony won't matter till it comes to a trial, which you want to avoid," Felicity nodded. "But you're thinking damage control, Oliver, without seeing all the damage." She shook her head. "Say she hadn't been caught tonight. Say she realized it was a trap, got away and left town. Unlikely, but hypothetically, say it happened. Her brief return would still be a problem. Do you know why?" she demanded.

"No," Oliver sighed again, turning to double-check his quiver because he still did not have the time
to be arguing about all this right now. "Enlighten me."

"Because the S.C.P.D knows Helena Bertinelli is the Huntress," Felicity responded so systematically he couldn't not see what she was getting at as she said it. "They know she started shooting a crossbow instead of a gun while she was working with the Hood. And, in that same timeframe, she was photographed a few times dating Oliver Queen." She shook her head again. "Just one reason her giving them your name will make sense, even if a lawyer can get it thrown out later."

"Which is why I have to go get her before she decides to say it!" Oliver exploded, turning to do just that since he now had all the gear he'd had to come back here for to make a raid on the S.C.P.D's central station even plausible.

Felicity's voice followed him, "The doors are locked, Oliver. And I just changed the password."

He stopped halfway across the room, vibrating with tension as she went on.

"You won't be able to unlock them. Not without blowing a hole through, or something like that, anyway. And then no one will need a password—or a warrant—to get in."

The vigilante spun back around, storming a few of the steps back towards her, but stopped just as suddenly as he recognized the security screens on each monitor. Not the one he'd installed months ago on the one computer he'd setup. This was the tech genius's upgraded system, which—while it was still supposedly a work-in-progress to get the already impressive setup 'just right'—wasn't something he would be able to get into on his own. And that was help that she wouldn't give him before she was ready, and he knew he didn't have it in him to even try to make her give him the key to either lock.

Not that Diggle would let him if he could. And the bodyguard wouldn't make any effort to help him either. Protecting the team was something he could count on the ex-soldier to not hesitate on, but saving Helena was something else all together.

And Tommy, while still watching nearby, wouldn't help him either. Even if he could... though the fact that he was still standing down here, listening, almost felt like it helped. But he didn't have time to think about that either right now.

"Fel-liss-ity," Oliver managed to growl her name out, barely. None of the animosity he could direct
towards most people easily while wearing the Hood would come now. Not at her.

So, not surprisingly, his aggravation didn't faze her. "Oliver," she nodded, holding his gaze steady again. "Stop. Think. Please."

"Think about what?!" he demanded as he set the case of smoke grenades back down because he clearly wasn't going anywhere with them right this instant.

"About what the Hood rescuing the Huntress would mean. What it would do."

Oliver blinked at her. "What are you—"

"It'll give her credibility the next time she's caught. And she will be, if someone doesn't kill her first."

Oliver blinked at her again, incredulously.

Before he could think of a response, Diggle was speaking up again. "She's right, man," the former soldier uncrossed his arms, to stick his hands in his pockets as he thought about it. "Right now all the cops have got linking her to the vigilante are the complaints of a bunch of crooks. Lot of 'em probably contradicting each other." He shook his head. "You attack the police station to bust her out? That's the word of who knows how many cops."

"All of them trained observers," Felicity tacked on quickly. "That is proof. Even without their security cameras, those are just the whipped cream and cherry on top."

"So what?" Oliver snapped. "If she gives them my name now—"

"That's not proof." Felicity insisted. "And if Detective Lance is actually stupid enough to pretend it is without investigation—again—he'll lose his badge."

"He won't make that mistake a second time," Oliver ground out. "But the task force will start investigating me. Again."
Felicity's eyebrows seemed to rise in slow motion this time, and it felt like the warning it was.
"What makes you think they ever stopped?"

"They dropped—"

"The charges, Oliver. Not the case." The genius shook her head as he stared at her, slower this time though, too; so her ponytail only barely swayed with the move. "They have to be more careful of you. That's why even Detective Lance treated you with kid-gloves when you were spotted meeting with Count Vertigo. He's about as bad as they come, and you were spotted with him by a cop. But all you got was, what? A warning? A verbal warning, not even on record, right?"

Each and every word she said just made it more and more obvious. One, that she really was a whole lot smarter than him; probably most other people, too. And two, that she was only thinking about all of this because she really did care... about him.

Oliver couldn't be angry with her for that, but he still had to go. He shook his head. "I was at the mansion being saved from a hitman by Lance when the Hood disrupted an arms deal across town. Can't be in two places at once."

"Two people can," she answered immediately. "That's how you did it. And even though none of the cops would like to think there might be more than one vigilante, that doesn't mean it won't occur to someone. Especially after the other archer went after all the same people as you."

He ignored the part about the man who'd almost killed him, because the so-called 'Dark Archer'—another Vigilante with yet another copy of The List—hadn't been seen in months. Hadn't done anything since he almost killed Oliver a few days before Christmas, and it wasn't like he'd been the first to almost do that—far from it.

"No," Oliver shook his head. "There's no reason they'd—"

"Most cops aren't stupid, Oliver. They can't afford to be. And detectives? They spend a lot of time thinking. About what they know, and what they don't." Felicity grimaced. "And if that idea pops? If it occurs to them that there might be more than one man in the hood? Why can't one of them be Oliver Queen?"

"Makes sense," Diggle agreed unhappily. "Leads right to me quick, too. No one asked why I wasn't
at the mansion to stop the attack that night, but that's exactly where your bodyguard shoulda been. If Lance remembers I wasn't there—"

"You could've been anywhere in the mansion," Oliver objected. "Or I sent you home early 'cause it wasn't like I was going anywhere that night."

The bodyguard snorted. "With all the people at your stupid party that you gave the mansion security staff barely a few hours to prep for? I should've said 'no' without someone there to cover for me," he shook his head. "You and I know you don't need a real bodyguard, but that's supposedly what I've been getting paid for these last few months. Not something we want the S.C.P.D thinking about either."

"And he lives by himself, Oliver," Felicity added, softly now. "No one to confirm he was home. Or not."

The archer grimaced. "He was seen at the party."

"Till you sent me to stop an arms deal," Digg nodded.

"And wow, I really haven't had any idea of what's been going on most of the time..." Tommy's stunned sounding comment to himself was just barely loud enough for all of them to hear.

Oliver opened his mouth to try another defense, but then forced himself to stop, shaking his head as he took a deep breath. "We don't have time for this!" he bit out, and pointed at the computers. "Open the doors."

The blonde held his gaze for another long moment, her face pretty even in the absence of all the emotion and brightness that usually animated it to the point of pure beauty. Then she shook her head calmly, so slightly her hair didn't sway at all this time.

"Felicity!" he snapped her name out as harshly as he could. It was even harder than the few times he'd tried to yell at Thea before she became a teenager while he was gone, but she didn't flinch.

"Oliver," she answered calmly, unperturbed.
"Open. The. Door. *Now.*"

"No."

Oliver growled, but still he couldn't really direct his anger at this impossible situation Helena had put him in at Felicity. He knew she was trying to help. Knew she wasn't mostly wrong either. Mostly. So he took another breath, then tried more gently. "Felicity, please."

Her coldly calm mask immediately softened with warmth that he'd missed every second it wasn't there.

Then her computer beeped. Repeatedly.

**BEEP-BEEP! BEEP-BEEP! BEEP-BEEP!**

"What's that?" Oliver demanded, moving closer as she immediately turned and disengaged her impossible security system with a handful of flying keystrokes.

It was tempting to pull her away from the computers—gently, but firmly—as soon as she'd unlocked them. So he could finally get out of here. But those beeps sounded like an alarm. And the only thing he could think of that should trigger any of Felicity's alarm programs right now would be the S.C.P.D looking for Oliver Queen after the Huntress had given up his name. He didn't think Lance even *could* be that hasty again, but he'd been wrong before and could be again.

Felicity scanned quickly through the lines of code like it was more than a bunch of gibberish that only looked like it was made up of letters and numbers crammed together. "Something's happening... I think it's on the police scanner..." She hit a few keys and a man's voice came through her speakers.

"...*Repeat,*" the S.C.P.D dispatcher's odd—almost wavering—voice got steadier as he finished. "*All units resume patrol.*"

"*Dispatch,*" another man's voice quickly followed over the radio. "*What about the officers in need of assistance?*"
"Officers,' plural?" Digg caught it too.

"SWAT's got the station covered, patrol. Multiple buses are already here. Resume patrol." The dispatcher barely paused before going on brusquely, "All units, be on the lookout for two perps. One male, one female. Male approximately six-feet tall; may be dressed in all black. Female is twenty-five, white, brunette. May be wearing purple leather. Both are armed and extremely dangerous."

"What happened?" Oliver demanded, eyes already watching what the tech genius was looking at while Diggle muted the radio, all of them trusting that—however her programs did it—they'd know if something else came over the police scanners. "Who the hell broke her out?"

Felicity's hands flew over the keyboard for a few more moments, numerous windows popping up across her screens, some of them disappearing or being blocked by another window just as quickly. When she stopped typing seconds later it was to study what looked like surveillance footage.

Oliver's eyes narrowed as he realized it had to be the security system for the S.C.P.D, but he didn't really care how she'd done that so quickly. "Felicity?" he asked her again.

Whatever the hell had happened there was over, except for the mess it'd left behind. Fortunately—amazingly—that mess looked like a lot of people stumbling around, and not a lot of dead bodies. All of it a lot more chaotic than the normal controlled-anarchy the archer had used before to slip in and out unnoticed. With evidence, which while guarded wasn't expected to just get up and walk away on its own, so the security around it wasn't anywhere near as tight as it should be for a dangerous prisoner.

"Working on it," the blonde replied just as tersely, not looking at him anymore. After a few moments—in which he realized she wasn't really looking at the security footage, but at the window of code next to it—she nodded. "They didn't loop the footage. This is—well, was—live. Um, just a sec..."

The vigilante's eyes went back to the screen as surveillance footage from inside the S.C.P.D's main station as she gestured to it, watching as the grainy videos of police officers and detectives in the late evening hours went backwards—rewinding on command. "Slow it down," he told her when it started to go too fast for even his eyes to follow as Digg came up beside him to watch.

"Just a sec," Felicity replied. "The first alert was from almost fifteen minutes ago, it just didn't hit the radio for almost the first ten minutes, so..." she hit a few keys again.
Then they were watching as the cops and detectives were working again, without the stumbling, paramedics and all over disorder that was there now, in the present.

There were some of the same people that'd be there later. The only one that looked shaky on their feet so far was an obviously angry drunk that four beat cops were escorting to lock-up. Some of the detectives he knew Lance worked with were obviously anticipating something—Felicity's neighbor kept glancing down the hall from his desk as he talked on the phone—but no one was rushing around like something had just exploded.

Oliver stiffened as Helena appeared, in cuffs with Lance and McKenna Hall on either side of her, being led to interrogation. "Anything from inside the—"

"Different system," the tech interrupted, tapping a few keys again. "Here it is."

Another video appeared, that was maybe a little clearer than the images from the hallway. Newer camera probably.

Lance kept an eye on Helena as McKenna sat her down. But the brunette didn't put up any fight at all. She just watched them, not seeming to care as the pair of detectives then turned and left the room.

Apparently leaving her alone to stew and get more worried. Not that that'd likely work on her. Why would it? She was fully expecting him to rescue her. Knew he had to. So she didn't expect to be there long at all.

"Fast forward," Oliver ordered with a frown. "Slowly."

"No, wait," Digg said before the blonde could comply. "Look," he pointed at one of the hallway shots.

Where one of the officer's had been bracing themselves against the wall, coughing for a moment. Another took a step towards them, as if to ask if he was alright, and stumbled. Then both of them started to sag towards the floor. The civilian that was sitting in a nearby chair was clearly already insensible as the pair passed out.
Oliver's eyes darted over all the other miniature images as the same scenario seemed to be happening—in some of them.

Outside the interrogation room, Lance had caught McKenna before she could fall face first to the floor, but his knees were buckling even as he did it.

The rest of the room wasn't in any better shape. One of the detectives at the desks had face-planted into his paperwork while reaching for a coffee mug that ended up shattered and spilled on the floor. Another had slipped sideways off his chair, barely missing cracking his head open on another desk.

The only one still awake for some very long seconds was Felicity's neighbor. Detective... Nick something-or-other. He wasn't on the phone anymore. He'd managed to get up a few steps down the hall where they'd all started collapsing first, before his knees were giving out too. He visibly struggled against it the whole way down, trying to keep his chin up and point his gun down that hall. Until his eyes finally rolled back in his head, and he passed out with his gun still in hand, his own weight still holding him partially propped up against the wall as he nodded off, too.

"Knock out gas," Digg stated the obvious.

"Looks like," the vigilante agreed.

"So-So Laurel's dad's gonna be okay, right?" Tommy asked shakily.

Making Oliver's eyes fly back to the window where he'd seen the detective fall: where everyone was clearly out cold.

"He should be," Felicity answered reassuringly. "Remember there are already E.M.T's there. They'd take him to the hospital if he wasn't one of the ones that was already up on their own—but it looked like a lot of them were, I think."

From what Oliver remember that was true, but he was already frowning as he looked at the interrogation room again.

There, Helena was out cold, too.
"Wait, how did she..." he trailed off as the images all went dark.

No, not all. Just the interrogation room, the bullpen and the hallway. All around that floor, if he had to guess. It looked like all the other cameras were still going: recording dozens of victims of what was obviously some kind of mass-attack using sleeping gas.

"Why would they cut the cameras?" Digg asked.

Felicity immediately shook her head. "They didn't... look, they're still recording," she pointed towards the dark screens, which did have the timestamps still changing by the second in the corner of their frame.

"They killed the lights?" Oliver realized. "But not the power." He shook his head then. "Why? And who are 'they'?" he demanded, even though neither one of his teammates could obviously know that.

Felicity actually flinched a little in her seat, and the sight of her shrinking away from him, even just a little, made the archer himself wince.

"Sorry," Oliver found himself saying without even thinking about it as he gently gripped her shoulder, forcing his fingers to loosen, to gentle just a little bit more in case it was tighter than he'd thought. His frown deepened a little as she seemed to only shrink further under his hand—she'd never shied away from him before. Hell, just a few minutes ago she wasn't giving a single inch as he yelled at her.

Felicity shook her head before he could decide if he should ask something or apologize again. "No, it's not—you don't need to apologize," she told him, hands starting to move over her keyboard again. Just a little too slowly for her. "I know it's frustrating... let me see if I can..."

All the men stayed quiet as she trailed off, and for a few more long seconds there was only the slightly too slow sounds of her typing echoing around the basement.

_Click-click._

_Click. Click-click._
"There," she stopped to point at another screen even as it opened, her emerald-green nail sparkling over the grainy black-and-white image.

Oliver vaguely recognized the alleyway only because he'd considered it as a place to ambush Lance; back before Deadshot's attack on the UNIDAC industry's auction. He'd decided it was better to wait for him to walk all the way out to his car in the police lot: and the camera right over that side door had been a big part of that decision.

The man walking out was only a vague shape in the shadows that were very long without the lights from inside the building to illuminate him and the door blocking the spotlight as it opened. When it swung shut behind them he was still a departing black shape. Obviously fit, around six feet like the S.C.P.D had guessed themselves, and not just all in black; but in what looked like all black body-armor. His outline was a bit too uniform, too rigidly lined, for it to just be from muscle.

Helena was thrown over his shoulder, clearly completely out of it still, just like all the cops inside. He didn't seem to be paying her much mind either, so whatever he'd knocked her—and more than a few of the S.C.P.D—out with was undoubtedly supposed to keep them out of it for a while longer.

Oliver was about to ask his new girlfriend to repeat the timeframe to get some idea, but stopped as the image got a little clearer another few steps away from the camera. Not completely clear... but the bow harnessed over a quiver full of arrows was unmistakable to another archer's eyes. Despite the darkness and the inert Helena hanging there too.

"Is that..." Digg trailed off in question.

"A bow," Oliver nodded slowly: wanting to un-see it. Or for the image to change right in front of his eyes. No, more than almost.

But it wasn't happening. The shadowy shape wasn't changing as the man on the screen walked steadily away without a care for the police station he'd just stolen a wanted criminal from. The audacity of it alone was reminiscent of that 'ransom video' he'd called The Hood out with back in December, all but confirming the unwanted realization that'd shot to mind as soon as he saw the weapons and the armor.
"The Dark Archer..." he said it softly, not wanting to believe it. If he were more superstitious he might think his earlier thoughts had summoned the man.

Next to him Digg stiffened, "Wait, you think that was the other archer rescuing her?"

The 'Dark Archer' or the 'other archer' were the names the S.C.P.D had attributed to the man, at least indirectly, and just like they'd thereby picked the two names he was known by: 'The Hood' and 'The Vigilante,' it had seemed to stick. Even though he hadn't been seen at all this year... until now.

"Apparently... " Felicity opined dryly.

She was tense, too. Oliver couldn't say whether it was because Helena wasn't behind bars anymore, even though he wasn't the one that'd rescued her, or if it was because of this man that she'd only heard about in passing. As someone who had, after all, put him in the hospital. He could identify with the second himself, and he could not hold the first against her.

"Why would he help your psycho-ex?" his bodyguard asked the obvious question that the vigilante hadn't wanted to ask himself.

Oliver started to shake his head, but stopped—a new rush of alarm bursting through him—as he realized the answer. "He wants to know who I am."

"What?" Felicity was still frowning at him when he looked back at her again but now she looked more confused than unhappy. "You guys mean the guy that tried to kill you before Christmas, right?" she was shaking her head even before both of them nodded. "There hasn't been any sign of him for months. Why would he bother coming back now?"

Apparently then, it had been Helena's unexpected escape she was unhappy with before if she was just making that connection now.

"He stole her from the S.C.P.D for the same reason the Major Case Squad was focused on her, like you said," Oliver replied, not biting the words out only because she was staring at him with so much concern clear in her eyes. "Because she's tied to me. Because she knows who I am." He started to turn towards the doors again. "I have to—"
"Have to what?" Felicity cut him off.

Oliver looked back at her in shock, because how could she still not want him to go now?

Her eyes were narrowed behind her glasses as she went on without waiting for any answered. "To save her? You're not seriously thinking that, are you?"

"Not that simple, Felicity," Diggle spoke up before he could muster a response. "If he finds out from her who the Hood is, none of us are safe. That man's a killer. And even if he kills her when he's done, he'll just come after all of us next."

"Well, yeah," the blonde allowed with a wince that was probably related to the fact that the bodyguard was starting to back him up. "But it might not even be him. I mean, the all black bodyarmor can't be impossible to find, right? And you picked up archery on an island somehow, but that doesn't mean everyone that wants to learn it has to get shipwrecked themselves for a few years to do it."

Oliver could only stare at her for several long moment, too horrified by the very idea of there being another other archer to speak at first.

"Not sure which worries me more now," Digg said carefully. "The thought that the other archer is after you again right now, or that that might be someone else. 'Cause that'd mean you've started some kind of movement."

The second was definitely worse, thought the other archer being back wasn't great either. Hearing it said aloud, however, snapped him out of staring at his girlfriend. "I don't want to start a movement," he snapped at the ex-soldier immediately.

"Why not?" Tommy wondered, raising his hands in surrender when the archer's glare turned to him and wincing when that move made his hand hurt. "I'm just saying, if what you're doing is good, and they're copying you..."

The wince made it stop glaring at the man that maybe, might still be his friend, but he still had to shake his head as he admitted, "I don't like the idea that somebody dangerous is out there..."

Tommy didn't say anything in response, but both his eyebrows shot straight up.
"Somebody else," the vigilante amended with an eye roll. "Cause typically?" he shook his head. "They don't show my level of restraint."

Felicity wasn't watching him when he looked back at her again, which surprised him a little. It made him wonder what she was thinking about, but not knowing where he had to go to find Helena now didn't mean they had any time to waste.

"Either way," Oliver carefully placed his hand on his new girlfriend's shoulder again, and gently squeezed it when she blinked up at him: glad that this time at least she hadn't jumped or shrunk away. "I need you to find them. Can you..." he trailed off to nod towards her computers, a little surprised she wasn't already volunteering something since she'd seemed so at ease with pre-empting him with what he needed before. "Hack more cameras or... uh, something?"

The computer genius blinked at him for another long moment, then her brow furrowed. "But they covered almost all the cameras they needed to—"

"By killing the lights inside," the vigilante nodded. "But he didn't bother with the alley. So maybe —"

Bzzzt...

Beep-Beep!

The sound of Oliver's phone vibrating almost at the same time as Felicity's computers beeped again made them all pause. He took the phone out as the genius started typing again, but she spoke up before he'd unlocked it.

"It's her. They—He, I mean, must've let her go? She's fine," Felicity jerked her chin towards the phone when his eyes darted back to her. "Well, she's mad about you not rescuing her yourself from the looks of that text, but—"

"You hacked my phone?" the vigilante asked her, blinking between her and locked, supposedly military-grade encrypted phone.

"Is that judgment I'm hearing?" His girlfriend didn't look at him as she answered, eyes on her computer screen while she typed some more.
"No," Oliver shook his head slowly, knowing a trap when it was laid out before him. "Pride," he answered honestly.

Not just because it was a way around that trap, but because it was true. The ARGUS phone was supposed to be completely secure from everyone but ARGUS, but Felicity had hacked it. Probably when she was working to make their comm system in general more secure, but the fact that she'd been able to do it—with Waller's people apparently none-the-wiser since she hadn't sent any single the device was no longer considered secure—was amazing. Remarkable, just like this woman was in every way...

The surprised smile the response earned him was a more than welcome change from the tension in the room. "She wants you to meet her," Felicity told him, voice a little warmer. A little more her.

"Course she does," Diggle snorted.

For the first time in a while, Tommy spoke up, too. "Doesn't sound like a good idea, buddy."

Oliver blinked at the best friend he was only starting to hope didn't hate him now, but then he shook his head once again. "I've gotta get her to go. To leave town." He looked at Felicity. "I booked her a ticket—"

"To Rome for tonight, yeah. Joanna De Santis is all checked in. She can fly out of Starling International in a couple of hours. I'll print it out now," Felicity clicked a few keys as the nearby printer came on and started spitting something out. "She has enough time to get through security, the airport's not that busy tonight."

"Wait, you can hack the T.S.A, too?" Tommy asked, sounding more shocked than he really should. "Isn't that... uh, really hard?"

No, hacking his bank accounts and keeping track of all his communications should be hard. Ideally, hacking the group responsible for securing all flights around the country should be impossible. But the military-level encryption of the phones provided to him by ARGUS should be even harder.

Not that that was something Tommy should understand well enough to be adequately impressed by without knowing about any of the important facts. And he was probably still assuming, at least a
little, that the main reason Felicity was involved was because Oliver was dating her. Given his track record, the idea that he might've started working with her long before he asked her on a date likely hadn't occurred to his former wingman.

"I can if I have to," Felicity confirmed evenly.

How easily she said it made Oliver exchange a quick smile with Digg, even while his mind was both listening to her go on and going over what the hell the other rescuing Helena and then letting her go could mean.

"But I'm just looking through the airport's security system now. The T.S.A has access to it, just like they have access to the No Fly List, but they don't control either one. Not that that matters," the blonde shook her head much more gently than she had earlier, and met Oliver's eyes again. "If the S.C.P.D sends a request to the F.B.I to add her to the No Fly List—"

"They'll do it," Oliver nodded. "She's a known serial killer who came from a mob family—"

"And she's tied to an attack on a police station now," Digg added. "They'll call that terrorism."

The vigilante nodded again, unable to deny it. "How long?" he asked, looking back at Felicity. "Before she's on that list?"

Felicity frowned, shaking her head slowly. "Hard to say. There's no F.B.I office here in Starling—there probably should be, but the closest one's in Milwaukee. It's not like they have to send someone on a horse though, they'll just email or fax it. Or both."

"Might call over after what just happened tonight," Digg pointed out.

"They might," Felicity nodded. "Once whoever handles the vetting and approvals there gets it thought," she shrugged. "Like you said, they don't really have any reason to not add her."

"So? How long?" Oliver pressed.

Felicity sighed. "It probably won't happen tonight, because it's late and it is Sunday. Can't promise
she won't be on it by tomorrow morning though."

"Can you..." Oliver shook his head. "Do anything?"

Felicity looked at him for a moment, then glanced at her computer, then back at him. "About her being labeled a terrorist?" she shook her head. "Why would I want to?"

"Uh, maybe we should..." Tommy started uncertainly, stepping towards the door while looking at Digg, but the bodyguard didn't look ready to go anywhere and neither one of them needed to.

"No, you two can stay," Oliver told them sharply, immediately turning his attention away from Tommy's disbelief and Digg's smirk and focusing on the genius again. "Felicity, the harder it is for her to leave, the harder it'll be for us to make her leave."

"That's why she has to leave tonight and you should go be really persuasive about that," she replied evenly. "Like, now, 'cause the text you didn't look at? It really wasn't very nice."

"But the alias I created for her will—"

"Will hold up, tonight," Felicity told him, shaking her head again. "After that? She'll have to be a lot more careful picking airports, 'cause her picture will be in the system."

"What does that mean?" Tommy asked, while the vigilante sighed because he already had a pretty good idea of what she was talking about.

The tech genius sighed. "It probably means no international airports, definitely not ours—because I know they have facial recognition software here. When you fly back into the country and they scan your passport?" she explained at Tommy's confused look. "Your face is being checked against the Terrorist Screening Database—that's what the No Fly List comes from, mostly. It can be fooled, of course, but it'd probably be better if she just avoided it."

"Well that means once she's in Rome she won't be able to come back, right?" Tommy sounded a lot happier at the idea, now that he was getting it.
But that was the point, and Felicity wasn't wrong—now she was the one saying he should go, after all.

"Not without being arrested, and she'll know that," Oliver nodded.

"That's why you want her flying out of the country," Digg realized.

The vigilante just finally picked up the pages from the printer, quickly folding them to stick them in the envelope that already held the passport he'd booked the flight under last night. "I should go," he told them, turning towards the door again. "I'll be back soon."

Tommy's cough made him pause, because the cut-off billionaire had a twisted wrist, not a cold, and that specific clearing of the throat was too deliberate to miss. When Oliver frowned at him in question, he jerked his chin towards the side door, but only waited till they were a few steps away before he spoke to him softly. "You're not seriously going to run off to your ex without fixing things with Smoaky first, are you?" he asked with a frown. "Don't remember you ever being that dumb without a lot of booze bein' involved, Ollie. And we were both pretty dumb kids back then."

The vigilante blinked at him, looking back towards where Felicity was still working on something on the computers—and Diggle was watching Tommy approvingly—before blinking at the other man. "There's nothing to—"

"This is your first fight, right?" Tommy cut him off, shaking his head. "And right now it's only on pause, Ollie. You really wanta let her keep stewing while you go meet the bondage bitch?"

That made Oliver blink again, but he knew better than to blame his friend for any dislike he held towards the woman that'd used him as leverage. Just like he knew that Digg and Felicity were both right. Not that he wasn't right, too, in some ways—but it did make the situation more complicated.

He was surprised that Tommy was actually speaking up about this, but doubted it was really for him. It was more likely that the other man liked Felicity. That maybe he thought she was the only good thing, the only truth Oliver had voluntarily shared with him since his return. It seemed much more likely than the possibility of his former wingman forgiving him already, or anytime soon. It was Felicity.

Oliver sighed, "I'll talk to her later tonight," he said, even though it was starting to feel like he'd never leave so being anywhere 'later tonight' could never come.
"Pretty sure she won't still be here," Tommy opined.

The vigilante frowned, knowing he was likely right. He looked back at the blonde again and winced when he realized she _was_ frowning.

It was hard to see with her looking away from him, but she didn't quite have her back to him. The back of her chair was, but she wasn't leaning against it: she was sitting straight up, spine stiff and shoulders back. And she was typing at less than half her normal speed: the click of the keys almost accusing in their slowness. How had he missed all that before?

_Click. Click. Click... Click._

Oliver swallowed, "Thanks," he nodded to the other man as he tucked the envelope for Helena in his inner coat pocket. Then he walked back over to her, stopping a little farther away from the computers than he normally might, and slowly raising one hand to rest on her shoulder.

She didn't jump or stiffen. He hadn't surprised her, which would've been bad.

_Click... Click. Click. Click... Click._

She did stop typing entirely as Tommy headed out upstairs to the new club he should probably be managing right now, while Digg just gave them some room. But she didn't look at him then, either.

Oliver swallowed again, then made himself say, "I'm sorry." The words were spoken softly, but she heard them. He could tell in the way her shoulder relaxed just a little under his palm.

"For what?" Felicity asked him just as softly, still looking at her monitors instead of turning to him again.

That seemed like another trick question, but he tried not to think about it too much. "For worrying you." Oliver shook his head, giving her a gentle squeeze. "I didn't realize... that aspect of all this bothered you so much."
Felicity looked up at him, her brow furrowing a little. "Of course it bothers me, Oliver. If they catch you..."

"I'll go to prison, I know." He nodded when she trailed off. "You and Digg might, too."

He didn't tell her that someone who had the power to get him out had all but said she would if that happened, because he was too useful to be left rotting behind bars. That wouldn't help her or Diggle if they went down with him. And it wasn't like he ever wanted work for ARGUS again—officially or not. It was one thing to trade favors with Amanda Waller just like he did with the Bratva, another thing entirely to let her cage and collar him again. No matter how nice the cage ever was.

The genius sighed and sagged in her seat a little as her eyes dropped closed. "Do you really think I'm that selfish?"

"What?" Oliver blinked at her, then quickly shook his head. "No. I—"

Felicity talked right over him. "If someone from the S.C.P.D tries to break into our network, Oliver, it'll commit suicide. All the data will delete and overwrite itself—twice—and then every device here will incinerate its own hardware. Remember, I told you that was why you had to know the passwords?"

"You didn't tell me all of them," he frowned, shaking his head. "And I thought you were kidding when you said the computers would blow up."

"Why would I ever joke about destroying my babies?" She sounded completely serious as she said that, so it didn't feel like the safest subject to pursue either.

Instead he reminded her, "They could still find your fingerprints down here. D.N.A."

The semi-serious—or maybe entirely serious—frown melted off her face as she rolled her eyes and leaned backwards to rest her head on the chair as she looked up at him. "You wanted everything as secure as possible for the club, 'cause you do know you built this place in the Glades. Someone you'd already met, with a background in cyber security—like me—would be an obvious, smart choice. So you borrowed me from Q.C to do some I.T setup for Verdant. Your name's on the building, remember? I would've been stupid not to take the job."
"We're dating now, so they'd be looking at you anyway," Oliver pointed out, then winced. "If you still—"

"I'm not breaking up with you because we had an argument," Felicity cut him off, turning her chair towards him, not seeming to notice his hand moving along her shoulder without causing her any pain. "Are you dumping me for caring about you?" she asked, slowly tilting her head with the question.

"No." Oliver swallowed, "Of course not."

"Good." Felicity gave him a small smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm glad."

"Me too."

Some more of the blonde's regular warmth entered the blues of her eyes at that, but she also looked... tired, he realized. Which only reminded him of how much she'd apparently been working—and therefore not sleeping—for far too long. Especially if it really went all the back to when Walter went missing. Months ago.

Oliver reached one hand up to cup her jaw. Now more than a little relieved that she hadn't thought of staying to monitor the comms or anything like that: like she had when they were working to save Tommy's father from the Triad.

She had been undeniably useful that night. If not for her hacking security to keep a watchful eye over the place while everything went down, they'd have no idea now that Malcolm Merlyn was more than he seemed. Tommy hadn't said anything about the two men his father had so easily killed in front of him.

So Oliver still wasn't sure how to look into that. Not because he didn't know there was a need: that was about as obvious as a fist in the face. With the potential to do a lot more damage and linger a lot longer than a black eye, broken nose or busted jaw if the C.E.O of Merlyn Global Group being more than he seemed traced back to The List. As it probably did. After all, Oliver's mother had a copy of the List, and his father had said he wasn't the only one who failed their city. He'd been relieved to not see the Merlyn name in that book: both the copy he carried and the one he let his mother burn. Because had had looked through the whole mint condition book, copying down all the names he hadn't know. Queen, Merlyn and a number of other family friends weren't in there... but that didn't necessarily mean they didn't have their own copies just like Robert Queen had had his. The Dark Archer had one, and so might Malcolm Merlyn...
But after urging his childhood friend to try and make up with the dad that'd never been there for him—just because he had the opportunity that Oliver could never have—and then fighting to safeguard the man's life... Telling Tommy the truth felt like a punch he couldn't throw. Not when he knew the other man would prefer all the damage a real punch would do to the emotional blow this one could inflict. Whoever made up the saying about sticks, stones and words had obviously led a very boring, un-dramatic and maybe emotionless life.

It was already a huge surprise that Tommy had been down here tonight. Not saying much, but listening in—trying to learn—and here. Because, like Felicity and Digg, he cared. Maybe enough to still want their friendship to survive...

So how could Oliver say anything to him about his father? How could he say a single thing against Malcolm Merlyn to the son that'd almost lost him on that night Tommy was undoubtedly trying to forget? Let alone ever consider using him to investigate the older Merlyn?

But Malcolm Merlyn wasn't the problem right now, and Oliver didn't need Felicity here monitoring what he and Digg were saying to each other when she could be headed home to bed. So she could go home and get some much needed sleep. It was also a relief that—somehow—there still weren't bags under her eyes. So that sleeplessness hadn't done any clear damage... yet. A benefit of youthful regeneration that wouldn't last too many more years.

Oliver just cupped her jaw for a moment, smiling as she leaned into his hand a little, unbothered by the bowman's glove. Then he made himself say, "You should head home. Get some sleep."

Felicity pulled away at that. "I will..." she answered, stepping away to grab her coat off her chair.

He took it from her without even thinking about it, holding the garment up to help her put it on. It seemed too small to really be a coat: more of a sweater, really, but then she was pretty small herself, so she fit into the sleeves and could tuck the whole thing tightly around herself.

"Thanks," Felicity said softly as she tied the coat off instead of buttoning it up. She'd looked down as she'd tied the bow, and studied it a moment longer after she'd finished, but then she made herself look up at him again. "Be careful with her tonight?" she pleaded softly, shaking her head as she hurried on before he could answer. "I know you want to believe she's not as bad as Digg thinks she is, but anger and hate can make a person do things they normally wouldn't. So just, be careful, okay? Please?"
Oliver sighed, knowing she was right and not able to be angry with her for caring. "Okay," he agreed softly, then stepped forward to wrap his arms around her, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead.

Not her lips. Though it was tempting. It wouldn't help, neither one of them was in the mood right now, and he really didn't have the time. He should've left a long time ago already. So pressing his lips to her forehead for a moment, holding her at least that long as she relaxed into his arms, had to be enough.

"I'll stop by after, all right?" Oliver asked her, still holding her but leaning back a bit so he could meet her eyes as she looked up at him.

"You don't have to..."

The vigilante shook his head, frowning a little. "I want to," he told her, hesitated just a second, then admitted. "Helena already knows where you live."

The blonde tensed in his arms, all the calmness of a second ago gone right away. But she wasn't afraid, she was scowling. "Of course she does," she sighed, shaking her head. "I'm a big girl, I don't need—"

"You want me to be careful with her," the vigilante cut in to remind her. "And I hope she takes the plane ticket, but if she doesn't..." he sighed. "There's plenty of security at the mansion. Digg's had them on high-alert since she first showed up there. If you want to move in while—"

"Oliver, I just met your family last night," Felicity reminded him, pulling away, but not trying all that hard when he didn't let her go. "I can't move into the mansion the next day. And you don't need to babysit—"

"Please, Felicity," he interrupted again, holding her eyes when she blinked at him. "We don't know what she'll do. We don't know what the other archer is doing. It's just safer, okay?"

Their gazes locked for several more moments he shouldn't be spending arguing, instead of just showing up later. After all, he had slept in worse places than her rooftop.

But finally she sighed. "Okay... I guess I'll see you at my place later tonight."
This time when she pulled away he made himself let her, watching as she reached for her purse and threw the strap over her shoulder.

She went up on her tiptoes to place a kiss to his cheek. "Be careful."

Oliver shook his head as he followed her, and pretended not to notice the smirk on their third team member's face when they finally reached the side door a few seconds later. "Take her home," he told the other man instead.

"What?" Felicity stopped just between Digg and the door to look back at him, blinking once again. "No." She shook her head, then pointed between the bodyguard and the archer. "No, he's going with you. Digg, you're going with him, aren't you?"

Oliver frowned at her, "No, he's—"

"She's right, man," Diggle cut him off this time, still leaning against the wall with his huge arms crossed once more. "You're the one that's going off to meet up with your insane ex and maybe the guy that put you in the hospital a few months ago."

The vigilante's frown turned into a full scowl. "Helena wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't what?" Digg asked. "Work with a guy that'd probably put an arrow in her dad without a second's hesitation after she helps him kill you?"

"Whether the other archer's there or not, the—Helena will be," Felicity reminded him. "So there's no reason for Digg to go anywhere with me. And you said you'd be careful with her."

Oliver started to shake his head, but she went on before he could respond.

"My car's right outside. Both of you can watch me get in it and drive away if you want." The blonde met his eyes again. "But you need backup a lot more than I do, Oliver. You realize that, right?"
The vigilante sighed.

His bodyguard spoke up again then, "If that guy's there, man, you could need the backup. Might even want it."

That was true... and it was possible that the Dark Archer—as the S.C.P.D had started calling him in their files after the fact—had just rescued Helena and let her go as bait for him. So it made sense.

He'd still rather send the former soldier with Felicity to make sure she got home all right and stayed that way, but he knew better than to keep arguing about it when he wasn't going to win them over. It'd be a waste of time that might end with Helena getting impatient instead of waiting for him to come to her. It was lucky that she hadn't come straight here, as she could've already led the other archer to them, instead of waiting somewhere for him. To ambush. Or just watch, so he could try and follow and learn more about him, since there had to be a reason that he hadn't made another appearance after beating him half to death back in December...

"Fine." Oliver made himself nod, holding her gaze as he assured her, "See you soon."

"Right," the blonde nodded again, but didn't open the door to head out yet. Instead she worried her lower lip for a moment, then met his eyes again. "Call me, okay? Once you're—when you're on your way, I guess? After she heads to the airport?"

The archer blinked at her, not sure why she'd requested that, but then nodded slowly. "Sure."

"Thanks," Felicity flashed him a smile that made her look a little less tired from the brightness of it alone. Then she did hit in the code that'd open the door, which was different now and more than twice as long as it'd been before last night.

Digg had told him she'd changed it remotely, which had irritated him a little at the time, but he hadn't had any trouble remembering the new sequence so far and he had more than enough things to worry about already as it was.

So Oliver didn't say anything as he followed her out into the alley, and further down it towards the rear parking lot for employees. He preferred when she parked in the alley itself, but her minuscule car hadn't been here when he'd arrived, so of course it wasn't here now.
Felicity glanced at his bike as they walked by it, but the soft words she started saying weren't about that. "I tied that ticket and passport into our surveillance system," she told him softly enough to ensure only he and Diggle would hear her. "So we'll know when she boards and when it takes off. She'll have to hurry to make it in time, but there's another one if she misses it. They'll tell her at check-in if it's transferred automatically. You might not wanna tell her that, though."

"Better to make her leave sooner if we can," Digg commented as he followed them down the alley. Both men shortening their strides so the blonde didn't have to hurry, though the sounds of her heels clicking lightly on the pavement still seemed to echo quickly in the alley.

At this point even the vigilante couldn't even try to disagree at all. They'd all prefer if Helena left town in a hurry. Well, he'd prefer if she hadn't come back at all, but what was done couldn't be undone.

"That's me," Felicity said unnecessarily as they reached the end of the alley, pointing to her the vehicle that was the closest one in the lot to the alley. "And you can't follow me to it," she told him with a small smile as she looked at him again. "You really don't want someone wandering out here for a cigarette break or something and seeing the vigilante walking me to my car in the employees only parking lot."

"Probably not," Digg chuckled.

Oliver grimaced, but agreed. "We'll watch from here."

Felicity actually rolled her eyes. "Stay safe," she told him again, before she went up on her tiptoes another time to press her lips ever-so-lightly to his cheek once more. Then she was walking quickly away, and Oliver was trying not to smile as he watched her until she'd climbed in, started the engine, put her seatbelt on and finally backed out and drove away.

"Better get going," Digg said a moment later, after her taillights had finally turned out of sight.

Oliver only nodded, turning back around to head for his bike while the bodyguard went for the most inconspicuous of all the cars in the Queen garage... which, looking at it now, he should probably by his partner some cheaper looking vehicles for everything related to being the Vigilante.

But that was for another night. Right now he had to climb on his bike and head for the meeting
place Helena had selected... and hope she was the only one waiting there for him when he got there.

Chapter End Notes

I should probably confess that while I did do some research into the TSA, the No Fly List, etc., it was all very limited (for me). As in I barely did more than skim through the Wikipedia articles and follow a few links from them. Therefore, some of what was said here may not strictly be true in the real world. I do hope it isn't as easy to hack the agencies that exist to protect us from terrorism as it's implied here: but it's something that's pretty mainstream for Felicity in Arrow fan fiction, and I think Immortals would definitely need someone with that sort of skill-set that could help them stay hidden and yet still living in the modern world... so some writer's license here. Hopefully it came across as vaguely believable and not too over the top? If anyone wants to share some clearer, concise knowledge: please be my most welcome guest.

As for the latest episode... SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT!

Not a big one obviously, since the death happened already.

And yes, it does sound permanent. The Canary Cry hammered that in pretty well. Plenty of drama, but I think I'm still mostly relieved that the deaths happened and the season's ending. The other Arrow seasons did do foreshadowing, but it wasn't quite to this extent. Not just because of the flash forward: there was waiting for the Olicity blow up, and wondering what the hell HIVE's evil plan is in the end. Maybe that's extra effective writing, maybe it's poignant acting or just the element of expecting a death... but I'm still kind of feeling relief that the death's happened, the waiting's over and the season's ending so I'll finally get to find out everything else that's going on.

Don't get me wrong. There's been some excellent episodes along the way, so it could just go back to my preferring to wait till seasons are finished and I can marathon them. Something I haven't done so much with Arrow. br />

Waiting for Oliver and Felicity's perfect relationship to blow up was painful, of course, too, but I'm still kind of waiting for them to come back together, and stronger for it. And hopefully thereby make the whole thing at least a little worth it rather than just a stupid stunt. For their character arcs it's definitely usable, but I probably won't be happy until I see it work out well.

On the episode itself, however... Over all it was an excellent portrayal of grief in general. All its types, all it's stages. Heartbreaking and sad all around, as it should be. Lance losing his daughter but quickly moving to denial and hoping to bring her back made perfect sense considering the world they live in. Digg hating himself for trusting his brother and being beyond furious was well done, too: sure, it takes a lot to make him blow, but a lot's happened. Felicity blaming herself for not being there while everyone hates that they let what happened, happen: very well done. I even kind of liked the 'fake' Black Canary running around. Not a lot of effort was put into her character, she was mostly just a prop for the episode, but one that was used very well. Nyssa coming when Lance called, checking on Oliver and attending funeral was perfect, too. She's definitely become a favorite of mine. Though it did make me wonder why they didn't have Sara show up for her sister's funeral, too: it's not like Rip couldn't have brought her to the exact day and time to attend... though that'd probably lead to a big fight about why they couldn't go back and prevent it and/or why they didn't stick around to save the city while Savage is still plotting world domination. So that's probably why it wasn't done. *sigh*
The flashbacks to right after Tommy's funeral... were kind of interesting. That Oliver
didn't watch the city crumble and then immediately fly a plane back to Lian Yu the
next day didn't make much sense, so seeing him there for Tommy's funeral and trying
to be there for Laurel worked, even if he did ultimately leave and let her fall apart for
the start of S2. It was also a very good way to say goodbye to her: highlighting all her
good and great points... though the picture mentioned there, of Oliver, Tommy &
Laurel still should've been the one Laurel was carrying around, I think. At least
Tommy was mentioned this time though, even if the woman he loved and died for
didn't consider him the love of her life... Ok, yes, I'm still a little sore about that.
Anyway, those are my two cents. I'd love to hear what everyone else thought.
Back to the fan fic: Some of you already had some great thoughts/suggestions last
time: many of which were right on point... though I won't say which ones till it's
clearly played out here. Personally I think those of you that were close already know it
now, but we still have more than a few chapters to go. And, of course, comments,
constructive criticism, thoughts on what's happened so far in the fan fic and is still to
come are always adored!
More to come soon! :-}
John Diggle's P.O.V.

John frowned as he looked through his sniper rifle down the alley that the vigilante was just about to turn in. “Arrow, you sure this is the place?”

“Yeah, why?” the archer's reply wasn't quite drowned out by the roar of his motorcycle in the background. “I'm almost there.”

It was left unsaid that he wasn't planning on stopping no matter what his bodyguard had to say. Short of this actually being an impossibly elaborate S.C.P.D trap or the ambush they were half expecting being way over the top... maybe.

John couldn't stop his eyes from rolling. "Cause she's not there.”

“What?” the other man snapped. “Say again, Freelancer.”

“She's not there,” the former soldier repeated, frowning as he stopped himself again from saying the other man's name. “The Huntress is not in the alley. It's empty.”

Barely a second later the deliberately nondescript motorcycle turned into that alley with its more describable rider. His black, fully face-shielded helmet effectively hid both his face and his hood, but the rest of his all-green outfit along with the bow and arrows on his back still stood out even if the lack of light made everyone a little color blind.

“She didn't wait,” Oliver growled a moment later.
“Or maybe she wasn’t here in the first place.” John shook his head. “You're not really surprised, are you?”

“Not helping, Freelancer,” the vigilante growled back. “Where would she go now?”

He'd hope that she'd head out of town before the cops could find her without bothering them again, since her father was obviously too well hidden by the U.S Marshalls for her to ever have a chance at finding him on her own.

“It's not like she can find her father on her own,” The vigilante's words were more for himself, but they set off alarms inside the bodyguard's head.

“No,” John swallowed, already starting to take his rifle apart and put it back in its box as quickly as he could while he went on. “But she knows who can.”

“What?” Oliver clearly hadn't made the same connection. “Who?”

“Fel—Oracle,” John remembered to make himself use her codename, not because it was likely that anyone would be listening in on them now, but because it wasn't impossible. A distinction their tech genius had made a point of clarifying, and after all the other good points she'd thrown at them not too long ago tonight he couldn't ignore the earlier ones that'd made a lot of sense, too.

“What? No—”

“Yes,” John insisted as he slammed the rifle case closed and started running for the stairs with it in hand. “Remember last night, she said she could.”

“I’m sure she can,” Oliver agreed, his motorcycle roaring to life again in the background even as he tried to reassure himself. “But Helena doesn't know that.”

“She was standing right there, Arrow!” John snapped back at him, taking the stairs by two and three at a time and flipping himself around the corners as fast as he could with the rifle case in one hand. “Unless she's deaf and really good at reading lips, she had to have heard her.”
Unfortunately, that couldn’t be the case though, because the bodyguard had seen her react to peripheral noises before.

The only response for several long moments was the sound of the motorcycle in the background. “She wouldn't...,” the other man tried to deny it, but he couldn't even make himself finish saying something he knew was completely untrue. The sound of his tires peeling on the pavement in the background gave that away.

“She would,” John said it anyway. “How far are we from Oracle's place here? Twenty minutes? Twenty five?”

“I'll be there in fifteen,” the other man sounded sure of himself even with more than one car honking at him as he undoubtedly wove through traffic at highly unsafe speeds.

“Try not to end up a statistic while you're at it,” the former soldier advised as he finally reached the bottom floor and headed out through the same door he'd come in through earlier, all but throwing himself back into the nearby car. “Won't do her any good then, and we already used the motorcycle accident excuse. I'll be there soon, too.”

For several long moments—while he dropped the rifle case on the passenger's seat and slammed his door shut, snapping on his seat belt, too, all in a flurry of motion as fast he could make himself move—all he heard was the motorcycle's engine occasionally interrupted by more car horns. He was just pulling out of the nearby alley he'd parked in when the other man started talking.

“I should've realized she'd do this,” the self-reproach—self-hatred, even—couldn't be clearer in the billionaire's voice. “And now she might be leading the other archer right to Fel—"

“Oracle,” John cut him off firmly, because it was the sort of thing they should get used to as soon as they could. “Another reason to play it safe. You can't fight off both of them on your own. Especially trying to protect Oracle at the same time,” He finished firmly, biting his tongue to keep back any comment that might want to come out about how he also couldn't afford to keep trying to save Helena Bertinelli in this scenario. It was nearly impossible before, but now it definitely was. The likely outcome of trying was one of their own—or maybe all of them—ending up dead instead.

“I know her neighborhood,” the vigilante stated the obvious. He'd undoubtedly been patrolling there even more than he'd admitted to the bodyguard himself. “I'll circle around, not come at her house from the front. There's no clear line of sight to her back door.”
The image of the archer kicking the door down as soon as he got there made John cringe. “You're gonna make sure she's actually in trouble before you bust in, right? 'Cause that's not a wakeup call you want to give her if she's already getting her beauty sleep.”

“She won't be,” Oliver sighed. “She never goes to sleep right away. Says she has to unwind.”

“Uh-huh, thus the movies?” John asked him, continuing to drag the topic out of him because he was hearing less car horns in the background and he thought even the motorcycle sounded a little less angry.

“She hasn't been getting enough sleep,” the younger man went on after a long moment.

Completely ignoring the reference to the thus far—somehow—still innocent sleepovers that were really very amusing to think about as long as they stayed that way. Once the pair finally moved to more intimate nights, John Diggle didn't want to hear anything about it. He never had understood why other guys would want to talk about their 'conquests,' but then again the women they were disrespecting were, in their mind, clearly worth even less respect than they themselves were.

“Did you know how much she was working?”

The bodyguard winced at the question, because it wasn't something he'd known for sure but it hadn't been at all hard to guess. “Normal day job with all of this on top of that's a lot of work.” He left unsaid that it was the sort of dilemma you'd expect any normal person—without beyond comprehensible wealth—to have with this sort of 'work.'

“It's more than that,” the billionaire grumbled. “Wal—She was promoted back before her boss was taken, but she hadn’t started the new job yet. So she's stuck trying to figure it out on her own while still doing her old job, too.”

John frowned, “Doesn't sound like a good idea,”

“She didn't tell me about it,” Oliver went on after another pause, speaking just barely loud enough to be heard over all the background noises. (Though at least there weren't any sirens yet. Just the violent hum of the bike's engine occasionally interrupted by screeching brakes and honking horns.) “She told...” he audibly struggled with the not saying specifics for names rule for a moment before he tried to talk around it. It meant the conversation took a lot longer than it might’ve, but it’d be a
habit they’d all be glad of it anyone ever did tap their comms. Even if it went against the radio standard for keeping chatter short—but then their comms weren’t really radios either. “Last night, when they met. Barely half an hour after I introduced them. She just...”

John waited a few seconds after his friend trailed off, but when he didn't add anymore, the former soldier shook his head again. “She told someone who could actually do something about it.”

“I could have—”

“What?” John cut the younger man off, quickly pressing his point, “Asked her new boss— ‘your mother,’ he didn’t say, ‘—for help sooner? ‘Cause you made it pretty clear to everyone that you wanted nothing to do with the... with all of that not that long ago.”

He was wincing himself even as he mostly managed to avoid anything too specific. It was still something that could lead back to Oliver Queen’s supposedly drunken ramble about not being his father, etc. etc. a few months back, but only if the person listening already had the idea that the vigilante and the formerly castaway billionaire were one and the same. Saying anything more specific than that—even over their hopefully secure comm channel—would render their use of call-signs useless if anyone managed to break the encryptions and listen in. But he’d learned months ago that letting Oliver Queen stew on something was generally a bad idea. Better to get out ahead of anything that might come out of too much brooding on his part. Every additional moment he had spent around Felicity Smoak had to all appearances corresponded to a steady decrease in that brooding overall. But even their genius couldn't work miracles over night: non-tech ones, anyway.

There was the sound of squealing tires and a particularly close car horn before the vigilante’s response to that came. “...I could’ve introduced them sooner,” he argued, his usually ‘growly tone’—as Felicity had referred to it more than once, and now John Diggle couldn’t get it out of his head—broken up by a sigh. “Or at least said something.”

“Maybe you could have,” John agreed, adding just as quickly. “But maybe she didn't want to be rescued. She wanted to save herself. So she did.”

“But she asked—”

“Her boss. Not her boyfriend,” He drove that home firmly, wincing as he said it but knowing that specific couldn’t be avoided here: it had to be driven home. Because yes, Oliver could obviously afford to ‘hire’ Felicity on at the club and pay her whatever she wanted—he’d probably pay her more than she made at Q.C without any discussion at all, without even thinking about it—but that was exactly the sort of solution their I.T genius had undoubtedly been trying to avoid. Not
unwisely since it’d tie her even more directly to The Vigilante if he was ever caught, perhaps inescapably, and if their still young relationship soured for any reason it’d leave her in an even more awkward place than working with them at night and at the Queen family’s company by day did. John shook his head, signaling for the next turn even as he glanced at the clock to be sure, then asked, “You almost there?”

The archer’s response was more of a grunt than a word, but somehow it still sounded like an affirmative all the same. Barely a breath later he killed the engine, and the comm was blissfully quiet: the faint sounds of the other man's breaths barely discernible for a little while as bodyguard’s eardrum got over hiding from assault by that beyond aggravating, vibrating sound once it was gone. Only a few seconds later, however, the comm was too quiet: telling him the vigilante had not only stopped moving, but stopped breathing for a second, too.

“Arrow, sit-rep?” John pressed immediately, speaking more quietly only because stealth might be important on the other end and yelling into the other man’s ear might lead to him making the unlikely mistake of yelling back.

Oliver took a breath then, “She's not here,” he said.

That should be good news, but something about his voice was wrong, and that kept the bodyguard from relaxing just yet, or slowing down at all. It was also why he hesitated just another second—long enough to wince through the CRACK he heard through the comm, which almost had to be the door being busted in.

“You mean the Hunt—”

“No!” the vigilante snapped, sounding growly again, but still more breathless than usual, like he was making himself breathe instead of doing it subconsciously. “Oracle. She's not here.”

Well then the Huntress probably wasn't either, so John almost wanted to ask why he'd just broken down the door. Instead he clarified to be sure, “And the Hunt—”

“No here either,” Oliver snapped again, going on this time. “No signs of struggle... her car's not in the driveway.”

“Think she never got home?” John's frown deepened even more with worry. “She left same time we did,” he glanced at the clock again. “Over half an hour ago now.”
“She's not here,” the other man said again: like saying it three times could make it not be true. “I don't see her coat, her purse—nothing she had with her tonight. She hasn't come back yet.”

John took that in for a second, checking the road sign he was passing just to confirm he was where he thought he was before he asked again, “So the Huntress got her along the way?”

This time Oliver didn’t ignore the possibility. “Or she was waiting for her outside,” he pointed out grimly. “Got her before she could get inside. Made her drive... somewhere,” He sighed. “Would’ve been more exposed, but Helena’s never been very subtle.”

‘Not very subtle’ seemed like a hell of a way to say ‘crazy psycho’ to him, but John didn’t say that. “Where would she take her?” he wondered aloud instead.

Hoping the man that'd slept with the woman at least a few times and actually talked to her some, too, might have at least some idea.

That man sighed in response. “I don’t know. She had a warehouse before—but the cops closed it up with all the other Bertinelli properties. I’ll drive by just in case. You go back to the Foun—the base. Oracle has tracking programs for all of our devices already set up there. Find out where hers are. Even if Helena made her dump her cell, she’d have to let her keep her laptop or tablet.”

“Can’t hack anything without a computer to do it with,” John agreed, but his relief at having some course of action quickly faded as he remembered one specific from the couple's first fight earlier that night. “This is on the computer that'll self-destruct if I use the wrong password?” he checked, hoping he didn’t sound too worried. But their tech genius's computer system was more than a bit intimidating even before he heard about that little tidbit while they were headed out here.

“You were using the computers this afternoon, the password hasn’t changed,” Oliver replied with a weak chuckle, then he ordered: “See if she has anything else on Helena’s phone, too. I think she started something on it when the text came in, but she didn’t tell me what. I’m gonna try to call her now.”

“Don't cut comms,” John ordered back before the other man could do just that.

Throwing himself off rooftops on a regular basis must make the man feel at least a little immortal, because simple precautions like checking in and even calling for backup when he obviously
needed it seemed to require force-feeding: and he all but choked on it all the way down. Leaving the comms open—whether they were totally secure or not (and they probably were, considering who'd designed their system, no matter where the parts to it'd come from)—just made more sense than expecting him to make contact anytime soon again.

“I need to call—”

“So make the call,” John retorted just as sharply. “You don't need to cut comms to do that. That’s why we’re not using personal phones for regular comms.”

“Are you headed back yet?” the vigilante bit back, but didn't say anything else against the reasonable demand.

“Turning now,” the former soldier answered evenly as he signaled to do just that. “Taking the highway part way back'll be faster.”

Oliver didn't argue, which someone who didn't know him very well might mistake for agreement. His bodyguard knew that while the vigilante might've mentally made a rough estimate of how close he was to their tech genius's house already, what decided him was that focusing on his phone right now was more important. “Dammit,” he spat a few moments later. “She's not answering.”

John almost didn't say anything, but the highway was clear as he sped up the ramp onto it and he didn't have anything else to focus on anyway. “Who's 'she’?” he asked, because it did kind of have to be clarified when the friend they were worried about and the one that was making them worry were both female.

“Helena,” he growled back. “It's not like she'd let Oracle answer her phone.”

“Maybe not, but maybe she threw her phone away already. If she thought you might track it.”

“I don't think even Oracle can trace burners, not if they don't have any G.P.S at all,” the vigilante sighed, but then said, “Trying her phone now.”

John was checking the rearview mirror when the vigilante's barely audible intake of breath make him tense.
“Felicity?” Oliver saying their third team member's name with so much disbelief in his voice a moment later didn't go a long way toward making him feel better, even if he was breaking their very practical rules for comms.

Author's End Notes: Again, I have to much to say for AO3. Sorry.

S4 comments in actual A/n, don’t read if you haven’t seen it yet.

Ok, so first the excuses:

(1) I really did want to update my other Arrow crossover first. It’s been even longer for readers there, and I finally made it to the editing phase, but even that’s taking a while. *sigh* So I came back here. Eventually. Though I am still working on the other fic, too.

(2) My uncle died, which while not completely unexpected (he’d been in the hospital a while) meant some unplanned travel. And sadness, too, but that was actually useful when it came to writing more. Not for writing more current scenes, unfortunately, but I’ve added a few more to my ever-growing stash of scenes still to come. (It’s getting scary. Like the Room of Requirement as the Hogwarts lost and found…)

(3) I did have another scene planned for here. But it’s more of an interlude, and it got to be very long, so we won’t see what Methos is doing in Seacouver till after Bloody Secrets. I think.

That’s it for excuses, so onto my comments:

SPOILER ALERT

IF YOU HAVEN’T SEEN SEASON 4 YET

(WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?)

SPOILER ALERT!

...

Chapter End Notes

Well, that end literally brought the season to a full circle, didn’t it? We’ve gone from Oliver and Felicity being the ones trying to lead normal lives (or at least Oliver), to everyone else taking breathers. Olicity’s resolving issues, so there’s one plus. Mayor Queen could be fun, and if he’s finally going to trust at least Felicity completely it’d prove his character’s developed.

John back in the military after Andy makes some sense. He did the same thing before S1. His anger at Laurel’s death and killing Andy to protect his family kind of worked. I though Andy seem to WANT John to kill him, but maybe not. That subplot lost my interest as soon as his continuing loyalty to HIVE was confirmed. Expected it since he didn’t want to see Carly and AJ, but still. I felt bad for Digg, of course, but overall it became boring. If they hadn’t killed off Deadshot already it might’ve been more interesting, since I’d like to know why HIVE bothered hiring him at all, but no…
Hopefully the Diggles aren’t apart for long though. Still not sure how I feel about Director Lyla. Unlike many I liked Amanda Waller as the government higher-up with questionable morals but overall utilitarian interests. She played her part well. I think we’ll still see her in the flashbacks because Oliver didn’t seem all that mad at her when he turned her down on really joining ARGUS and in S2, supposedly he had reason to want to kill her. Arguably he does already, but it didn’t seem to be there yet. But Lyla was always a good 2IC to Waller, with a stronger moral compass and stronger ties to the team. I don’t see her as an adamant anti-hero. Didn’t hate her scenes, I even liked a few. Her actually saying that she’s not Amanda Waller was great. If they try to use John going off to war as an excuse for her to turn into a total bitch that only softens at all around her daughter and can’t afford to give a damn about her friends anymore… that’d destroy her character entirely. But so far the writers have handled her a lot better than some other characters.
Thea backing up makes sense. She has plenty to think about, not the least of which is her triple-crossing father who only switched sides in the end again because there was no safe place to escape the nuclear fires anymore. Hope we’ll get to see more of Roy, but not sure the show’s willing to swing that for more than an episode if Thea’s just hanging up the red leather a little while.
Lance and Donna are still cute. Didn’t like Donna sending her ex away because their daughter had too much in common with him: that’s the first negative in her column. Noah had helped… but I’m sure we’ll see more of them both. And Lance, too. He can’t stay away for long. He couldn’t even leave till he was sure the battle was over: sure it was Oliver’s speech that made him admit it, but that was still in character. So they’ll be back.
Hopefully William and Samantha won’t be. He’s not supposed to see his father again till after his 18th birthday, right? (Please, please, please DON’T start S5 with everyone several more years in the future! Really, please don’t.) Laurel’s death is now clearly permanent. Pity: she had grown into her own this season. We might see her again in the next crossover with Flash, but she won’t be the same Laurel. If they go that route and it’s well-written it could be amazing.
Darhk’s death was an expected eventuality that took too long in coming. Oliver being so anti-killing and compared to why he didn’t kill Slade ignored that he DID kill Ra’s in the year in between, who Darhk was more comparable to. Really, Darhk had every right to taunt him about it. Unlike Andy I don’t think he thought Oliver would actually do it.
Oddly I’ve found myself wondering about Nora Darhk. Didn’t care about her before that, even when Thea threatened to kill her (cause what else could she do). That bothered me less than their giving her back to whacko-Daddy. Never mind ending the world so that she doesn’t have to grow up without evil-Mommy, what about leaving her in the creepy chamber with the totem, a bunch of dead bodies and people probably dying outside? That scene reminded me of a side-quest in Dragon Age where you’re supposed to save a creepy little girl from an only slightly creepier-demon. Amusement factor there may’ve endeared her to me.
Looking forward to S5. Oliver’s headed to Russia, and this is the last year of flashbacks before we’re caught up to S1. So S5 has to be how he joined the Bratva. Finally! Anatoly has to be back, right? Yay!
Then we have the few details about the next villain. Criminal mastermind with no magic/superpowers but a body like Khal Drogo’s on Game of Thrones? Yes, please. Back to the basics for the show, which could be great. We’ll have to wait and see… so this is a good time to start back into fan fiction again!
Let me know what you think! And more to come soon! :-D
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Thanks for everyone’s kind words so far. It has helped. I still feel bad for my aunt and my cousins more than anything, but it’d be wrong if I didn’t, so…
Enjoy the next scene, and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver Queen’s P.O.V.

The voice that answered just after the third ring was not the one he was expecting, even though it was her phone.

“...Hi, Oliver. Wow, that was fast. I thought you'd be at least another half hour. Or longer since, you know, she hasn't checked-in yet. She's already at the airport though?”

“Felicity?” Oliver couldn't keep the astonishment from his voice as he said her name, anymore than he could stop himself from relaxing just a little as the normal sound of her babbling made some of the tension in his muscles immediately ease out and away. Because he wasn't hearing any pain or panic, just her normal babble as her brain moved faster than even her own mouth could sometimes follow. He almost sagged against the nearest wall in relief, but the door he’d broken was in the way.

It’d been a surprisingly sturdy door. Much sturdier than he’d expected, despite his having previously noticed that her front door was solid and more secure than he would’ve expected, too. It took him three tries to break through it into her kitchen, and that third time he wasn’t holding back anymore than he had on the second attempt. There weren’t even that much splintered debris as a result; just the mess of what’d been the high-end dual locks that’d held it in place till he forced the door itself out of the way.

It was not a door that anyone would be able to break in quietly, that was for sure: and he knew her front door had twice as many locks and might be even sturdier. He’d noticed that much about her home security before, along with the alarm system and the outdoor lighting. It’d been in his way tonight, but hearing her voice now and knowing she was fine, it just helped him feel better.

Even though he would have to replace that door for her home to be secure again… and apologize for breaking it in the first place.
“Yes, Oliver, this is my cell phone you've called,” the genius pointed out, laughing lightly, some of the usual brightness breaking through no matter how tired she was. “Or was there some other girl you were trying to call tonight after Miss Bertinelli boarded her jet-plane?”

The vigilante ignored the question and the teasing tone it was asked in, though both were just as much of a surprise as the fact that she seemed to be all right. “Are you alright?” he demanded of her, because he had to be sure. “Where are you?”

“What?” he could almost see her big blue eyes blinking as she answered him. “Of course I'm alright.” She hurried on before he could say anything. “And you're the one that wanted to come over after she's gone, so you can't ask me why I haven't gone to bed yet.”

It was her defensive tone more than her words that made Oliver frown now. “Can I at least ask you why you're not home yet?”

She hesitated barely a breath, then asked, “If I say 'no,' will you really not ask or just get even angrier with me?”

Oliver rolled his eyes, though he had to smile a little as that anger she was referring to seemed to be waning just by listening to her. Just like the painful fear and worry that adrenaline had been burning through his body and his brain since the realization of what Digg was implying had had him speeding out of that empty ally a little while ago. “Where are you?” he repeated again, forcing his tone a little softer and less demanding because she wasn’t reacting well to that and he needed to know a lot more than he needed—or wanted—to argue at all with her.

“We agreed we'd meet at—”

“I'm already at your house, Felicity, and you're not here,” he told her, then demanded again, still with still forced-calm as he stepped outside. He tucked his phone back into its pocket, speaking into one of the Bluetooths inside his helmet, as he focused on fitting the door back into its broken frame. Hoping fixing it would help him rein in the destructive drive that he’d never willingly direct towards her, because he’d already snapped at her too many times as it was lately. “So where are you?”

That still sounded harsher than it should have, but it didn’t take a carpenter to see that the door was not going to just go back together like it was before.
“...You were supposed to call first.” She protested weakly, not sounding quite petulant enough to be called childish. She was too tired for that, and again he had to wonder at how much sleep she’d been getting at all.

“Fel-liss-ity…” Oliver growled her name, though it came out more like a sigh than the snarl that any criminal who’d met him should later fear.

“Fine, fine,” she sighed, before going on. “I had some work to finish, so I went back to Q.C first.”

Oliver scowled at that, but she kept going before he could say anything.

“Thank you for the flowers, by the way. They're beautiful.”

Referring to the big bouquet he'd had delivered to her at work... because he wasn't sure she'd accept them at home. Not after last night. She hadn’t answered her heavy door when he’d tried to apologize to her after reacting so badly to her unwanted offers of help. Well, what he'd been reacting to, of course, had been her being anywhere near Helena—giving the Huntress another piece of leverage to use against him. But Felicity had just been trying to do what she'd always done: help him. She didn't deserve to have her head bitten off for that... though after the scare tonight the thought that Helena knew her name now still felt like a bunch of frozen poison in the pit of his stomach, biting and burning as it thawed.

“So she's alright?” Digg's voice came through the comm that was still in his ear, and on at the ex-soldier's insistence.

The archer hadn’t forgotten any of that, but their teammate’s interruption still startled him. “She's fine, Freelancer. She’s at work,” Oliver made himself say it flatly, both because they were using the ARGUS-comms that Felicity hadn't gotten around to saying were secure even from their creators yet, and because using Digg's call-sign made it clear the words weren't for her. “Arrow, out.”

“Give her my best,” Diggle got in before he'd hit the switch to turn the device in his ear off without bothering to wait for the ex-soldier to sign off. Just in case he wouldn't. Not because Digg necessarily wanted to listen to him yell at Felicity—from his tone he was reminding him not to—but because keeping the comm live as much as possible was something the other man had seemed set on lately.
“Wait, you’re still on comms?” Felicity asked, clear surprise in her voice as it came through the speaker that was installed in his helmet itself and linked to his personal phone. “Why are you—”

“Not anymore,” Oliver cut in, forcing himself to draw in a long breath before he said. “I’m sorry I needed to send them. The flowers,” He admitted, but he was glad he had ordered them based on last night, before everything tonight. He hurried on when he realized how that sounded, “I shouldn't have snapped at you. Either time… I'm sorry.”

“I know,” his new girlfriend agreed, her voice soft again. But this time she might be smiling, though he wasn't sure as she went on. “I understand why you're so worried. I worry about you, too, you know.”

Oliver closed his eyes. “I know,” He shook his head slow, then forced his eyes open as he headed out the back path, leaving the door and its busted frame to be fixed later. It would have to be, because both the door and frame wouldn’t fit together like they were originally designed to until they resembled that original design again.

“So how did she take it?” Felicity asked him, and how light her tone sounded—combined with his internal debate over whether or not he’d be better off confessing to destroying the door now—made him take a long handful of moments before he realized what she was asking.

Oliver frowned again, “She wasn't there.”

“...She wasn't?” The genius repeated, sounding very surprised, which to him was more surprising than the fact that Helena hadn't been where she'd said she'd be. Or where they’d feared she’d be. “Huh. I—um. I can't say I expected that,” she continued after a long moment where he found himself imagining the thoughts flying around inside her head faster than he could ever hope to think. “Well, okay, no point in waiting for the notification to trigger once her alias has checked in, then. She can't check-in, let alone fly out, if she never got the ticket...”

“Why were you watching the airport anyway?” he asked, mostly surprised because if she really had to go into work in the middle of the night then why should she be also wasting time keeping track of their side of things? Then again, that might just be his deeply-seeded and growing dislike of how hard she made herself work showing itself again. That some of that hard work was for him didn’t make Oliver feel any better about it.

“I can't really make sure you're covered from all angles if I don't know the angles, Oliver,” the
tech expert answered, her even voice not quite hiding what sounded like the same uncertainty she'd offered her help last night with.

The vigilante sighed. “I didn't mean it that way,” he told her quickly, then added, “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Felicity answered, and this time she was definitely starting to smile again as she said it. After a moment, she continued calmly, “So if she's not flying out tonight, and she's not meeting with you, then what's she up to?”

“I don't know,” Oliver admitted, shaking his head. Because the only thing that'd made sense to him when he realized she wasn't there and she hadn't come to the Foundry was that she must've gone after Felicity instead. Must have either gone to her house or been waiting for them all to leave the club, and even though that hadn't turned out to be the case, the thoughts still made his frown deepen as he finally climbed on his motorcycle again. He kick-started it quickly, and was just as back on the road, but it didn't feel fast enough no matter how hard he gunned the engine. Not when he was wishing he hadn't let himself stop minutes ago. He'd feel a lot better if he was already at her side. Or at least a lot closer than he was right now.

“It's not like she can find her father on her own. If she could, she would've killed him already. And she can't stay here in Starling,” Felicity continued, so obviously thinking out loud that he didn't even bother responding, just kept listening as she went on after barely a breath. “I mean she's tied to a terrorist attack now, so she's a terrorist—well, allegedly, I should probably say, technically, but she was in the interrogation room before the attack and the only thing that changed, other than everybody getting some unexpected naps, was that she wasn't there after it. And with the footage the S.C.P.D does have, they can be sure she was at least the point of it.”

“Did anybody die?” Oliver interjected when she took another breath.

“...What?”

“At the S.C.P.D,” he clarified. “Did anybody die there tonight?”

“No—Well, I don't think so. They used, um, some kind of knock-out gas, right?”

“That's what it looked like,” the vigilante allowed. “But that can kill, and the other archer's killed before,” He thought about it a second, and shook his head. “He let the hostages go back in December, didn't bother attacking until after I'd freed them. But he would've killed me, and he did
kill several others before that.”

Felicity was quiet a little longer than he would've expected, though maybe it just seemed more pronounced with his bike's engine echoing through his helmet and into his ears as he sped through his city's streets. He couldn't hear her typing, though if she was in front of computers she had to be. “We don't know it was him,” she finally said. “Not really.”

Oliver snorted, “Felicity, there aren't that many people that are actually capable of something like that. Even fewer that'd consider doing it for better reasons than rescuing Helena Bertinelli,” He shook his head. “She destroyed her father's organization and is still trying to kill him—the Italian mob knows that, so they'd never help her. And she doesn't have any other ties to someone who might.”

“Except you, you mean.”

“Yeah.” He sighed as he leaned into the next curve so he could speed around it. “Yeah, except me.”

Her hesitation still seemed particularly noticeable, but this time he assumed it was just because she still had more thoughts than he could imagine blurring around inside her brilliant brain. “Well, if she wasn't there then at least he wasn't, either. So, uh, no trap, right?”

Oliver snorted again, surprised by how chipper she sounded about it, though that tiredness was still there—why she thought any I.T project mattered enough to head into work in the middle of the night he did not understand. “No, no trap,” he confirmed, hoping his irritation at her job wasn't in his voice. “Just an empty alley. So maybe he never let her go. Or if he did, she has some other way of finding her father now.”

The first was very possible, all things considered. It didn’t exactly fit with the other time the Dark Archer had tried to take him out before. In December he’d lured him with hostages by making one read a speech about doing what was necessary to take him out. True, the hostages were allowed to leave, but that was only once Oliver was there for the fight that nearly killed him. So letting the Huntress go to do whatever she wanted, whether it involved meeting up with The Hood again or not, didn’t fit with the other archer’s M.O. No, it was far more likely that the Huntress’s body might be found somewhere in the coming days… but then why had he let her send that text and not even been there for the trap?

“Uh-huh…” Felicity hummed as she thought about it a moment more, then the thought struck her at last. “Wait. You thought she went after me? That's why you rushed over to my place without
“Yeah,” Oliver sighed, frowning again. “Finding you not there was not a pleasant surprise,” he didn’t try to disguise his worry, but it still came out sounding more like anger—though he wasn’t sure she noticed as it sounded like she was still just thinking it through on the other side of the line.

“Because you thought she'd kidnapped me.”

Oliver could again see her nodding in his head as she worked it out.

“Sorry. Though that would be a waste of a lot of time on her part, and she doesn't strike me as all that patient. From what you guys have said about her. And the S.C.P.D file on her. And the F.B.I file.”

Oliver blinked. “She has an F.B.I file? Already?” he asked, as thrown by the switch in topic as he was by the fact. As far as he knew the F.B.I hadn’t even bothered looking into him yet, which he could only attribute to Starling City’s relatively small size, the scale of his crimes—that didn’t involve direct attacks on the police unless they came after him first, save that time he needed to tell Lance about Deadshot—and, more than likely, some amount of influence from Amanda Waller. Considering all the equipment he’d already gotten from the Director of ARGUS, also, he owed her anyway, but that’d make it even more so. But Oliver refused to waste too much thought on that: Amanda’d find him again whenever she wanted to collect. She always did.

“Not from tonight, from everything before that,” Felicity told him. “Remember, her father was a big-time mobster, but now he’s one of their major witnesses against the mob. And she’s trying to kill him. And even before this attack on the S.C.P.D-thing, she was a serial killer, so…”

Oliver blinked. “So I have an F.B.I file?” he clarified, and he could hear her second of hesitation again before she replied.

“...You really shouldn't sound surprised by that.”

Maybe he shouldn’t, but that’d mean Amanda hadn’t intervened nearly as much as he’d been thinking she had. The F.B.I coming to Starling City to start hunting him down was exactly the kind of thing that'd force the Director to step in—either covertly on his behalf and/or just by pushing for him to work for ARGUS again. Voluntarily or not. He’d actually thought, at this point, he could trust her a little more than that… but maybe not.
“They're not investigating you yet though,” Felicity went on, sounding only a little like she was trying to reassure him.

“They're not?” Oliver repeated, more than a little relieved.

“Nope. Just keeping tabs on the S.C.P.D's investigation so far,” his girlfriend confirmed. “Probably helps that you haven't hurt any upstanding citizens. And as far as they know you haven't left Starling, let alone crossed state lines. And they have enough to deal with most of the time with investigations they have been invited into.”

“Invited?”

“Yes. That's generally they way it works with them. They do have to actually work with the local cops, you know. And the S.C.P.D haven't called them,” Felicity paused, then clarified. “I mean, I'm sure they take over stuff that's big enough without waiting for an invitation sometimes—there wouldn't be all the stories about jurisdictional friction otherwise.”

Oliver ended up coughing instead of snorting this time, though he was smiling, too. “Jurisdictional friction?”

“Well, that's the most polite term I've found for it,” Felicity answered evenly, but he was pretty sure she was smiling, too. “Though I'm not sure how realistic all the dramatized stuff is about that.”

“Uh-huh,” Oliver acknowledged, still smiling as he started towards his bike again. Completely sure—after all the familiar, rapid key-clicks he’d heard in the background on her end—that she was still working even as she talked

“Either way it works out well for you so far,” his girlfriend went on.

“You should be finishing your work,” he told her as he climbed back on his bike, barely hearing her reply over the roar of the engine as he started it up.

“What?”
“Let me worry about Helena, Felicity,” Oliver insisted, tucking his phone away in his coat pocket because he was already talking to her through the Bluetooth in his helmet—he’d never taken it off when he got here. “You should be heading home already. It’s almost midnight.”

“Ugh, did you really have to remind me?” the genius groaned.

Oliver shook his head as he turned towards downtown. “Why are you at work in the middle of the night, anyway?”

“I went back. I’m pulling an all-nighter, obviously,” she replied, sounding so matter-of-fact that he was pretty sure she was kidding.

But he half-sighed, half-growled her name anyway. “Fel-liss-ity...”

“Just joking,” she assured him, and he could imagine her eyes rolling around in a circle behind her glasses. “I just need to finish a few things. I left earlier, just in case you might need me for—well, anyway, I had to come back to start this tonight.”

Guilt stabbed at him again, because after everything she’d still wanted to be there for him and had to go out of her way to do it, but that was something they could talk about later. “Felicity, college kids pull all-nighters to finish projects,” Oliver shook his head. “I’m sure Queen Consolidated doesn’t expect you to—”

“I said I was joking about that, didn’t I?” she interrupted him, sounding only a little snippy, going on quickly. “I’m switching Q.C’s server over to a different system. My system. It’s what Walter made me System Administrator for in the first place, and since it sounds like your mom is going to follow up on it I want to be as up-to-date as possible.”

Oliver was pretty positive his mother hadn’t been calling to talk to her before their planned meeting Monday morning, so even though she probably had said she was following up on Walter’s plans for Felicity it didn’t seem likely that she expected anything before that meeting. He didn’t roll his eyes only because he was keeping his gaze on the road as he sped down it at a slightly more sedate pace then before because the hurry wasn’t necessary and he was sure she’d say something about all the car horns Digg hadn’t mentioned. “My mom—”

“And it’s easier to start the systems switch in the middle of the night. When no one’s using their
computers,” Felicity went on insistently, and then added, “Well, there’s that guy in Accounting that I think might be sleeping in his office, but he hasn’t signed on in a few hours. And the poor P.R people that have to cover their nightshift just in case something happens. And Security’s still here, too, but they already know—”

“So you went in to work late this morning?” Oliver demanded, rolling his eyes when she hesitated again: as if not realizing that the hesitation alone was answer enough.

“...No,” she admitted with a sigh that was almost too soft to be heard over his motorcycle, which was also probably why he wasn’t hearing the familiar background noise of her rapid-fire typing anymore. “There were a bunch of problems in I.T this week. I had to—”

“My mom told you that you shouldn’t be doing the general I.T work anymore.” Oliver reminded her. “She’s your C.E.O.”

“Actually, she said we’d talk about it first thing Monday morning. That’s...well, the meeting’s in a little less than nine hours, now, but—”

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes to take you home,” Oliver cut in, letting every bit of authority the last half decade had taught him seep into his voice. He should’ve stripped out of the leather before leaving her townhouse, but he wasn’t going to stop now and he knew the cameras at the east entrance of the Q.C garage still hadn’t been fixed yet, so he could change when he got there. He wished more than a little that she lived closer to downtown, but he could also see how it was convenient for her that her home was almost exactly halfway between Verdant and her day job at the headquarters of Queen Consolidated.

“...Okay,” Felicity sighed, then her tongue tripped through a yawn. “...Excuse me. Okay, maybe I should get some sleep,” she admitted sheepishly. “Good thing I just finished the important bits.”

Oliver had to smile a little as he shook his head again, amused by her stubbornness here despite everything else.

The sound she made a second later, however, wiped that smile away. “Uh-oh...”

“What?” Oliver demanded immediately, waiting impatiently when he heard her hesitate again because knowing it was something bad had him back on edge already.
“Um, well, one of my A-Cave programs just sent me an alert.”

Oliver refused to comment on yet another new name for the Foundry, knowing she'd only insist on using it more often if he did. Instead he asked, “What is it?”

Really, really hoping that it wasn't what he thought it might be.

“It intercepted a police report. A local sporting goods store just got robbed. Only thing stolen was a high-powered crossbow. And a bunch of bolts, too, ‘cause they’re kind of necessary.”

So Helena wasn’t dead then. And the Dark Archer wasn’t holding her somewhere, though he might still be following her… somewhat surprisingly even the first didn’t give him any sense of relief. Only the same dread as the second.

Oliver didn’t say anything when Felicity stopped talking, too busy hating the warring parts of him: one that wanted to kill Helena to end all of this, and the other part that still wanted to save her, even though he obviously couldn't save her from herself and that part was smaller than it’d once been. A lot smaller. And still shrinking.

“Looks like the alarm system was triggered about forty minutes ago,” Felicity went on too-calmly. “And obviously she’s the main suspect, ’cause—”

“Anyone else would've stolen guns,” Oliver nodded, not letting himself start swearing, even in Russian or Mandarin.

He wouldn't be surprised if the genius was well-educated enough to recognize it. Or that she watched enough T.V. Both his teammates had surprised him by recognizing a few words when he swore in Mandarin, but according to Digg that was because of some show about cowboys in space named after a bug... and he still wasn't sure he wanted to ask about that. It was a safe assumption, however, since Felicity did seem to enjoy watching television and movies regularly—or as regularly as she could with the crazy hours she worked.

“Not much else there, but it's safe to say she's still in town,” Felicity went on gently, and it almost hurt as much as it helped to know that she really did seem to understand how he was totally torn over all of this. “I'll let you know if I learn anything more. In the meantime, just watch your...”
Oliver's frown deepened as she trailed off, but his spine went ramrod straight when he heard another recognizable voice in the background.

“Hi. I don't think we had a chance to be properly introduced last night? I'm Helena.”

His heart stopped.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure everyone can see where this is going. Yes, there’s a little ambiguity left, but we’re back to the show a bit more. There’s still some room for some crazy, of course. So we’ll have to see where Helena goes. Or you guys will, anyway. I’ve had the next scene written for a while. Now I just have to edit and revise. Joy. *sigh* Shouldn’t be too long of a wait, but your comments always help me plow through the conundrum that is editing my own work. *hint**hint*
But, seriously: Thanks again for everyone’s kind words already. It really has helped. So, thank you all.
Let me know what you think of this bit, what’s to come, and/or anything else that’s come to mind! More to come soon! :-)
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Word of warning – the warnings about blood, gore, etc. up above? Really relevant in this chapter. If you’ve made it this far, I wouldn’t think it’d bother you, and it’s not a whole lot more than is semi-normal in the show, it’s just very central to this chapter. So, you’ve been warned.

And maybe there should be a profanity warning, too. It just seemed to fit well in this scene. I don't think it's too overt the top, but it is there.

Enjoy. Hopefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity stared at the leather-clad brunette she really never would've expected to see inside her workplace.

Anymore than she would've expected crossbows to make any kind of comeback. But, then again, bows had, and all before Oliver started hunting the corrupt elite. There was Legolas, and Katniss, and Merida... not exactly the same thing, no, but maybe part of why interest in archery was on the up-and-up again. Even before Oliver localized it all...

“It's rude, you know, talking on the phone when you have company,” the masked and maybe-mad murderess chastised, pointedly aiming the crossbow straight at her then. Her mask-framed eyes had already been zeroed in, of course, but the bolt-point was a little off-point. So now the Immortal only had to worry about pain, blood, and much less about what anyone would think about what anyone would think about her slow-reaction to being held at crossbow-point.

Good thing she'd already setup a safeguard for that. Because Oliver had a tendency to think that other people wouldn't find it weird when he brought in bullet-ridden laptops and waived around needles that looked like weapons. Now, at least, it meant that the Q.C security guards on duty wouldn't have any way of knowing something was going on up here on the I.T floor for at least another fifteen minutes, and she could extend it rather easily if she needed to. Especially since the other woman undoubtedly wanted her to be using the computer now.

“Felicity let me talk to her!” Oliver's yell was loud enough for the ex-mob princess to hear even across the room.
It made the Immortal startle slightly, because the man that she was fast falling in love with was now the most predictable part of this scenario. The part that made sense and wasn't surprising her. So her mind had already moved onto everything else—everything that *didn't* make sense. Trying to rein it all into some semblance of sense.

Felicity offered the phone to the other woman without batting an eye or saying anything. That *Alice in Wonderland* like smile dropping into a barely-there frown told her the other woman had heard him, too. So she obediently pressed the 'end' button when the brunette shook her head.

"Feliss—"

If the vengeance addict was going to hurt her, or even try to kill her, Felicity should have an easier time hiding the fact that she came back from the dead if Oliver *didn't* hear it. Assuming she couldn't think of a way to neutralize Helena without revealing the full extent of her considerably greater martial skills. Skill which weren't at all in line with what she'd told Oliver and Diggle so far, even with her taking sword-fighting classes as a child that they could tell she must've been a protégé at, were that the case. She could hope, of course, that the young woman might not be quite as far off in the deep end as Digg assured her she was, but she wasn't going to count on it.

Oliver's 'psycho ex-girlfriend'—as Digg aptly called her—was clearly crazy enough to *not* respond to even the League of Assassins intimidation tactics the way she'd been expected to. The question now was: was that a combination of determination, growing up in a crime family and maybe her time with Oliver... or was she really just that crazy?

“Hmm... Oliver sounded worried, didn't he?” the Huntress commented as she pointed her crossbow towards the ceiling again.

And Felicity had the stray thought that she was really glad she was here in the middle of the night. Alone on this floor, and at this point almost alone in the building. At least none of the security guards that would check on her after that first headcount when they were locking down the building were here: and they obviously hadn't noticed the armed and masked woman in the elevator. So each one should still be going home to their families, safe and sound.

If the Huntress shot her, she'd survive. The Immortal would be as good as new in a matter of hours. Or a day or two, at most. Sooner, if the Huntress was both a good shot and aiming to kill, because her Quickening would have her up again very quickly considering the amount of adrenaline she could already feel coursing through her blood.

It was the kind of thinking her brother—and pretty much everyone else who'd known her long
enough to notice it—hated. Felicitas really couldn't help it though. Some mortals might die if a bee stung them, though most would only cry out in pain, and maybe they'd be sore for a little while after. But she was an Immortal: as long as she kept her head she would be fine... and she'd been around for a very long time. And she had already seen so many people die.

“He's good at that, you know. Pretending to care..." the Huntress shook her head, forcing a small smile that still looked a lot like a sneer. "You're dating him now, right? I saw you at the club opening; before you were dismissed, I mean,” the other woman finished with a crimson smirk that really did remind the Immortal of that cat in Alice in Wonderland.

A thought that didn't belong here anymore than the Huntress herself did, but there it was. Did the fact that the woman was here mean Felicity shouldn't try to trust the League going forward, or were her orders to blame?

Felicity didn’t answer, only returned the other woman’s gaze evenly.

The Huntress struggled to hide her frown, but then smirked again. “Did he mention we used to be lovers?”

Felicity sighed, not at all in the mood for this obviously at least a little insane—and jealous—woman's games. “What do you want, Miss Bertinelli?”

The brunette's smile was sharp as she responded: more like a shark’s than a cat’s now. “Let me let you in on a little secret...” she slowly shook her head. “It's not going to work out between you two. You see, Oliver? He has a particular talent. He uses people. He used me. He's using you. He used... what was her name?” that toothy, crimson-framed smile became a sneer. “Oh, yes... Laurel.”

Felicity didn't let herself react to the name anymore than the rest of taunt. Honestly she was surprised the woman was jealous enough to bother with taunting her at all when she should've started with the threats already. But rising to the bait wouldn't satisfy her, and it might make her even less predictable.

Though it wasn't hard to ignore the mention of Laurel Lance. The Huntress, for whatever reason, clearly thought it should hit home, but it didn't. Felicity knew Tommy's girlfriend still held a place in Oliver's heart; knew that she always would. But Felicitas had mourned almost a score of husbands in the centuries she’d been in this world, and each of them had owned their own piece of her heart.
It would be wrong of her to hold loving Laurel against Oliver—it wasn't like he'd cheated on her with the lawyer. In his mind, Laurel was with Tommy now, and while that might change. Felicity was fairly certain he'd never choose to cheat on her. The whole thing with Laurel's sister ending with the yacht sinking should guarantee that much at least...

That, and Felicity knew the tortured man that'd come back from Lian Yu with a mission was not the spoiled boy that'd washed ashore there. They were worlds and worlds apart, even when most of the world—nearly all of it—was too willfully blind to see it. Oliver could barely create a box that looked like the one he'd once embodied, never mind managing to actually fit into it ever again.

“And her sister...” Helena added, stretching her sneer into more of another frown as she still didn’t get the response she wanted. Clearly not knowing what to think about that, other than that she didn't like it. But then most people had a hard time adjusting to the unexpected, it was why they formed expectations and all those boxes in the first place. “And who knows how many others?” she shook her head contemptuously. “I would get out of it, before you get yourself hurt.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Felicity replied calmly, not blinking as the crossbow pointed at her was slightly shifted again. It was still aimed towards her torso. “But I doubt you came all the way up here just to advise me on my love life.”

Oliver was several minutes closer now. She didn't say that, but it was reason enough to move this along.

The Huntress didn’t scowl this time, but that disappointment was there in her eyes as she replied. “No, I didn't.” She jerked her chin at Felicity's main computer. “You said you could find my father. Do it. Now.”

Felicity gazed back at her for a long moment, a thousand plans forming inside her head and being banished just as fast.

Maybe the mortal woman in front of her wasn't as wicked as Digg seemed to think—but she was hurting, and lashing out at the world in her pain.

The ancient remembered the heartache of losing her first husband well. Remembered how he was stolen from her so unexpectedly, so unnecessarily—murdered, by a woman that Felicity would hate for all eternity. Even knowing why the other Immortal had done what she'd done didn't diminish her desire to avenge him. If Felicitas and Cassandra ever crossed paths again—without Methos
around to interfere again—Felicity was almost certain she'd take the other ancient's head.

Almost.

But whether she would issue that challenge and follow through on it or not, she'd never hurt others. Never hurt innocents who'd had nothing to do with the ancient crime. A wrong that was committed so long before almost all of them world's present population came into being. That they—all of them—truly had nothing at all to do with. Even the mortal bodyguards Cassandra had employed the last time they'd met—the only time she'd encountered the other ancient without Methos also there to intervene—had been enough of a deterrent for Felicitas to let her run. They had nothing to do with her ancient warrior-prince's too early death. Staining her hands with their blood, ending their already too short lives, would be both wrong and wasteful. After all, she could wait however long she had to.

Helena Bertinelli couldn't. Her enemy was as mortal as she was: no more durable and capable of dying from old age well before her if nothing else got him first. So waiting and patience couldn't come easily to her either.

If the pain Helena felt at her fiancé's death was anything like hers had been millennia past, Felicity couldn't expect her to be reasoned with easily. That her own father was the murderer of his son-in-law-to-be would understandably augment that pain.

And Oliver's refusal to help kill him was likely viewed as yet another betrayal... Felicitas hadn't reacted well when Methos had refused to let her pursue Cassandra. Before or after the funerals of her first husband and two of the three children they'd adopted. And she hadn't reacted much better when he'd interfered again on the other Immortal's behalf centuries later.

Add to that the jealously Helena obviously felt at Oliver having moved on... well, there was a reason the wrath of a woman scorned should be feared.

But Tommy hadn't done anything to this woman, and she'd still tortured him. She's threatened Oliver mother and sister, who also hadn't ever hurt the Huntress.

Just like none of Felicitas first family had ever hurt Cassandra, but she'd still killed almost all of them just because the queen wasn't willing to turn on a man who'd become their friend. Had earned her trust and admitted he was trying to change years before his former slave came to demand they give her his head. It was decades, lifetimes, after that before Felicitas really thought of Methos, her mentor, as more brother than protector and teacher, but even in those early years she hadn’t been able to turn on him. To give up on him when he hadn’t give up on her, let alone for a bitter woman
she’d only just met who would listen to reason—wouldn’t listen to anything at all. Someone who was only a guest in her household because the man she’d hated had asked them to shelter her, and who's show of gratitude for that had been to demand his death.

Had Cassandra had any skill with a blade back then at all, she might've demanded a duel. Trial by combat—something all nations back then had to honor because most of those in power could still remember how they got that power. Military might had been a very real thing back then, and remembering to both respect and honor that was not optional. But the Witch's skill was with herbs and poisons then, and later with magic. Not swords. That she was even willing to raise a sword against Methos herself thousands of years after he'd stopped being Death was something of a surprise a few years back. One far more unsettling than the volatile, impatient presence of the mortal woman with her now. No matter what that might mean about Mazin and the followers of Ra's al Ghul.

“What are you waiting for?” Helena snapped, what little patience she did have already spent. "Do it!"

Slowly Felicity shook her head. “I won't be an accessory to patricide, Miss Bertinelli.”

“You help Oliver!” the Huntress snarled at her, crossbow shaking in her hand: jerking between pointing at the servers or Felicity’s head—either of which she’d have to catch because there was no way she could cover it up otherwise. “He's killed men just like my father! Hell, my father's worse than some of the men Oliver's killed!”

“Maybe he is,” Felicity allowed, shaking her head again, leaning back in her seat to make the furious woman's aim drop with her: back towards her torso again. Which it did, a moment later: the bow-woman's hand steadying just enough to be pointing straight again as the blonde watched her coolly. “But I never had anything to do with that.”

The lie fell from her tongue easily. She had of course suspected Oliver Queen was the Hood long before she found him bleeding all over the backseat of her car. Each favor he’d come to her for had only solidified her suspicions more and more, just like the list she’d received from Walter and copied down before giving it to Oliver, had done the same. But she didn’t need to let this fuming, furious mortal know any of that.

“I've been helping him, yes.” Felicity nodded. “But since he told me he was the Hood, I know he's only killed a few people—and all of them were trying to hurt someone he cared about.” She deliberately didn't finish with ‘like you,’ though she'd said ‘hurt’ instead of ‘kill,’ so that the comparison was there, whether that bolt was shot at her tonight or not.
The Huntress scoffed, “So what? You think you've changed him?”

“You don't change people, Miss Bertinelli,” Felicity shook her head. “You can only choose to change yourself. Whether that's for someone or not is up to you,” she hesitated only a second, then asked, “Would Michael want you doing this?”

“What?” the Huntress hissed, her shocked face quickly giving way to the anger it'd become too accustom to already.

“If it's online I can find it,” Felicity told her quietly. “You were engaged to Michael Staton, till his —ah, quote-unquote, 'mugging.'”

“Mugging,” the brunette was sneering again as she shook her head. “Michael wasn't mugged. He was murdered. By my father.”

“I know,” the Immortal answered just as quietly.

“You know nothing!” Helena snarled, her hand shaking so violently Felicity was honestly amazed she didn't trigger the crossbow by accident. But she gained control of herself a harsh breath later. “All you need to know is where my father is right now.”

“I can't help you with that,” Felicity answered, wincing even as the answer flew from her lips, because she saw the mortal snapping even before the bolt was triggered and shot across the small room.

THWIP!

Not at her head, or the computers behind her: barely even at her torso.

It took every bit of self-control Felicity possessed not to catch it. To hold herself in place instead of dodging away or plucking the bolt out of the air before its head hit her as any Amazon could be expected to do. As she'd taught Mazin—and through him the entire League of Assassins—how to do. As she, Felicity Smoak; vigilante's computer genius girlfriend, shouldn't be able to do... so she didn't.
SMASH!

It stabbed through her shoulder with enough force to send her chair crashing back into the wall of servers, and she didn't try to hide her pain as it was happening or it stopped. Agony as hot as a fire's heart screeched through her whole upper body, while her skin broke into a cold sweat and her stomach started to roll. Her Quickening immediately responded, surging along screeching nerves towards the injury... but there wasn't much it could do with the bolt still there: oh-so-painfully in the way.

Felicity forced herself to breath in and out several times through her nose, careful to keep her shoulder as still as she could when she did so, biting back her stomach's impulse to empty itself for the useless—and additionally painful—thing that'd be. Damn, she'd forgotten how much getting shot—and not dying right away—hurt!

Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!

Her chair being jerked forward again and rolled back toward her desk—jostling her shoulder and the bolt in it with every fraction of a turn the wheels made—forced her to cry out again, even as she strained to open her eyes.

Helena was scowling at her when she managed it. Though there might've been a touch of unease in her eyes, it vanished as soon as she knew Felicity was looking at her. “I didn't want to do that,” she snapped out, even as she pointed her now reloaded crossbow back at Felicity again. “But you had to make me, didn't you?”

Felicity didn't bother trying to answer, just focused on breathing in and out through her nose; trying to make her vision stop darkening along the edges. Because now wasn't a time to pass out. From pain—Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!—or blood loss.

Fortunately (and unfortunately), the Huntress hadn't hit her with a kill-shot. As expected. Not an immediate one, anyway. It'd take her a long time to bleed out, especially with the bolt still in there.

If Oliver found her and Huntress like this, he’d probably kill the other woman and take Felicity to the hospital. Probably. If the Huntress got away, or if he let her go, he’d still take the Immortal to the hospital. And they’d take the bolt out, and her Quickening would heal her even while the doctors were doing whatever they’d do these days when a normal, mortal human came in with an injury like this: and they'd notice when the flesh they were working on was healing before their eyes. They’d notice when the dangerous artery that may very well have been hit sealed all on its own. Especially with the little lightning bolts of her Quickening dancing around and across the
wound. If Felicity, for whatever reason, flat-lined on the table, they'd definitely notice when she woke up anyway before they'd even left the operating room. Which, with the amount of adrenaline flooding her system right now and her Quickening building up more and more as it fought to heal her, was unavoidable if she made the mistake of passing out with the thing still in her.

So she reached for the bolt, only for her hand to be slapped away from it.

SMACK!

“You don't pull it out, idiot,” Helena snapped again, derision in each word. “God, you don't know anything, do you? Stay awake!”

SLAP!

Felicity cried out again as the other woman's palm collided none too lightly with her face, jerking her head sideways and turning her neck and again moving her shoulder. She forced her eyes open again anyway.

Not to help Helena now. No. If ever there was a time she might've even considered that, similarities to The Witch aside, the Huntress had shot it right out of her body. Whether it was because she was completely crazy, just jealous or a combination of the two was something to think about later. But she needed to pull that bolt out as soon as possible, and she needed to be able to see Helena to manage that.

Why had she let herself get shot again?

Oh, right, because she'd more than half-expected a few mortal members of the League of Assassins to be shadowing the woman and intervening already. Recapturing her so that she could be whisked away. So much for that box's shattered remains.

Twenty minutes, Oliver had said... how long ago was that? She had to get the bolt out and the wound bandaged before he got here!

Why had she wanted the League to intervene, rather than thrashing the other woman herself?
...Because Oliver wanted to give the woman another chance. (Not a second chance. This had to count as at least her tenth, didn't it? Tenth and last...) And expecting the League to drag her off somehow seemed less dishonest than killing the woman herself would. Then letting someone sent by her former student, supposed friend and brother, still did. It wasn't any more honest, of course, but it felt that way.

All that, and so far she'd only admitted to having some experience with swords. Not any martial abilities outside of that. Least of all hand-to-hand combat skills great enough to take on an armed opponent while unarmed and win. Easily.

But Oliver did want to help this woman... Why did she tend to fall for heroes?

SLAP!

The woman struck her again, but it was lighter this time. Enough to make her stop second-guessing herself and just go forward with the new plan B that'd started taking shape as soon as she saw the Huntress standing here. That was the only way forward now that the League clearly wasn't going to be of any further assistance now.

“I...” Felicity forced herself to take a deep, careful breath when she couldn't get the words out. “I've hacked... the F.B.I before.”

“Good,” Helena approved, and Felicity doesn't need to look at her face to know that Cheshire-cat like smile she'd worn when first spotted her here on her face again. “I'd expect nothing less from Oliver's pet nerd.”

Felicity swallowed back the retort that wanted to come at that, forcing herself to strain towards her computers with her good hand, refusing to move the other one; because that was the shoulder the bitch had shot her in. “It's gonna take... lot longer with one hand.”

“I'm sure you'll manage,” the words were snapped out again, and the anger in them was all the warning the Immortal had before the bolt in her shoulder was twisting.

Felicity screamed as it sent even sharper pangs of pain through her torso. There was no point in suppressing her reaction: she wasn’t a warrior in this life and still didn’t think she wanted to be, and letting that scream out was a lot easier than keeping it in. Especially since she couldn’t even focus on healing the wound right now. The bitch probably barely moved it, since by the time the
Immortal's sight cleared she was back to where she'd been before, but even that slight movement hurt like hell.

"—icky," the Huntress finished saying something in that scowling tone of hers.

Clearly she didn't know all that much about torture if she thought there wasn't a chance Felicity couldn't hear her. Sure, the crossbow bolt was in her shoulder, not her ear—unfortunately—but high levels of pain ricocheting up the nervous system tended to tune out all else. At least in Felicitas' experience. Were it not for her own prior experiences with torture increasing her pain tolerance and endurance—combined with her Quickening continuing to work, to burn, for her survival—she probably wouldn't have heard the fool at all. No, she probably would've passed out by now. Into blissful blackness... but then, when she woke up she'd still be in pain. Assuming she'd been born only a few decades ago, and hadn't already been long dead for thousands of years. Perspective.

Then again, Helena Bertinelli wasn't much of a murderess before her brief training period with Oliver, was she? Sure, she shot her targets, and managed to kill them, too; but Missus Queen wasn't the only innocent bystander hurt in the carpets of crossfire... And maybe Felicity did spend a little too much time browsing the S.C.P.D's case-logs these days.

Her hand being yanked to the nearest keyboard made the Immortal realize she'd been sitting still too long, for the Huntress and any chance of continuing secrecy, so she forced her eyes open again. Not entirely sure when she'd closed them.

“What are you doing?” Helena demanded a moment later, when Felicity opened one of her own programs—probably thought she'd be using a browser or something like that. It was a good thing she'd already allowed this Q.C terminal access to her personal systems, because that would've taken forever.

“Hack ing," the Immortal replied dryly as she typed in the command code for the program she wanted to activate, grimacing as even typing with her uninjured side made her torso complain. Her body wasn’t used to suffering pain that didn’t go away pretty quickly, and it didn’t like it.

It'd be difficult to manage with the Huntress hovering over her shoulder, but she'd actually been in more than a few worse spots. At least there was no smoke this time and the only source of burning was her own body and the Quickening inside of it. Granted, typing with only one hand while trying not to move her whole upper body was annoying, and moving at all was rather painful, but signing into her private network wasn't particularly difficult, even though she tried not to do it from work. Setting up the mirror site with Helena squinting over her shoulder was even somewhat satisfying.
“I don’t see anything about the F.B.I there,” the Huntress snapped after a little over a minute of watching her type one-handed.

“Hacking's more code than anything else, Miss—”

“Stop calling me that!” she interrupted sharply.

“It's your name,” Felicity pointed out without stopping her half-speed typing; she'd expected the objection eventually, after all.

“It's his name,” was the woman's not unexpected answer. “I'm the Huntress.”

“Pretty sure you can't get credit cards under that,” the Immortal bit back dryly.

Obviously the bolt in her shoulder was a grievous enough wound to stir her Quickening quickly, whether the recognition of danger had started an early adrenaline surge or not, because the area was already numbing as the energy sizzled around the wound it couldn't completely heal, or even really start to, because the bolt was still there. Or it might be more because that was how the Immortal-exclusive survival mechanism worked during a fight; dulling the pain and working towards healing so that the Immortal might survive. Usually something she only experienced with other Immortals as her adversary, other Immortals she could quickly kill. But then again this woman wanted to infuriate and terrify her with her sarcasm and threats, so it wasn't surprising that she'd managed the infuriating part at least.

Still, Felicity was very careful not to move that shoulder anymore than necessary as she entered the next few lines of code to copy the C.M.S of the targeted site over to her mirror, where its reflection would then be altered per her commands.

What Helena was after was an address, after all. Any address that made sense should send her out of here in a hurry, since she knew Oliver was on his way and would stop her—at the very least—if he got a chance. The trick was making sure she sent the Huntress somewhere that wouldn't get anyone hurt...

“What are those numbers?” Helena demanded, jerking her crossbow towards the top of the screen—probably referencing the address she didn't recognize in the uniform resource locator, since it was the only thing on the screen she likely recognized at all.
“An I.P.v6 address, one of mine,” Felicity answered honestly. Seeing no reason not to. Regardless of what happened here tonight, Helena was here because she couldn’t hack, so the chances of her being able to get into Felicity’s private network after this were slim to none.

“Why are you entering all of this stuff?”

Felicity had to make herself not look at the brunette as she replied, “Because you want me to hack the F.B.I Database, don’t you?”

“You said you'd already done it!”

That almost made the hacker stop to blink at her, but she still knew better than to waste the time. “Believe it or not, it’s not a great idea to leave evidence of having committed a crime saved on your computer. A federal crime even more so,” Felicity bit back, then took a deep slow breath, trying to not look too relieved as her Quickening had finally completed at least the initial part of healing her.

It really was a tool for survival, after all; like the adrenaline fired off by the fight or flight reflex in response to fright. Only it reacted to injuries rather than emotion—for the most part, anyway; the stronger the Quickening, the quicker, and more effective, its reaction. And she was an ancient, who’d taken more than a few heads when she’d had to. Ergo, her Quickening was very strong. Now, so as long as she didn't move her shoulder too much, and thus aggravate the wound that couldn't completely heal as long with the bolt was there, the pain was subsiding to a manageable level while her brain kept working the situation she was in.

Which was why she kept babbling in response to the murderess's silence. “Or any computer, really. Mine’s harder to hack than most, but there’s probably someone better than me out there,” Felicity sighed as she entered the final commands, keying the re-write in her system to replace the addresses with houses that’d just gone on the market in Starling City. “And even if the F.B.I can't trace me—which, they can't 'cause they don't even know I'm doing this—but if someone sees you leaving and me with an arrow in my shoulder, they can probably get a warrant—"

“Fine! How much longer?” the Huntress finally interrupted, sounding more put-upon than angry this time.

“Just a second,” Felicity quickly eyed the important parts to be sure, then hit 'Enter.' “Ta-da,” she declared, not even trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice as the altered mirror site was displayed on her screen. Only to wince and gasp as that nod was apparently too much for her still tender—and bolted—shoulder. “Ow...”
“Milwaukee?” Helena’s confusion was clear, “Why—”

Felicity spoke up before that confusion could turn into anger again, though that was still simmering under the surface. “It’s the nearest office, Starling City doesn’t have one,” she reminded her, closing her eyes for a moment to breathe through the new pain.

Their city had an international airport, which was pretty much a requirement for Felicity to live any place these days. Flying anywhere in the world, after all, was a great way to escape a headhunter if she wasn’t sure they were someone she could beat. But the city wasn’t quite big enough for its own F.B.I office. Then again, she doubted the ARGUS base near here wanted the F.B.I around if they could avoid it, so that probably had more to do with why a population center for over half-a-million people didn’t merit it.

“Well where’s my—what’s happening?”

“Program’s still running. Technically, we’re hacking the U.S Marshalls through the F.B.I—easier than trying them directly,” Felicity forced herself to open her eyes again to watch as another window opened, this time with the F.B.I Database heading that Helena wanted. “There’s your dad, under—”

“I see it,” Helena interrupted as she snatched the mouse and double-clicked on the folder.

Felicity watched with relief as the Huntress nodded a few times while she read through the information that was displayed. Not showing any sign at all that she might doubt what she was seeing even a little.

“Okay,” the brunette was smiling widely again as she stood up. “Thank you for your help.”

“No problem,” Felicity breathed as she watched the woman go, wincing as leaning further back in her chair made the bolt—which was definitely lodged into the chair back, crap—slide inside her shoulder, too. Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!
“Sorry about the shoulder!” was the derisive—and catty—farewell the woman called over her own shoulder, and then she was gone.

Finally.

It was enough of a relief that she’d left for Felicity not to swear after her.

The Immortal let herself glance at the clock then, and blinked. Had that really only been five minutes?

“That's a good thing,” she reminded herself with yet another wince.

Because Oliver had said twenty minutes before he knew Helena was here—so she'd be surprised if she had much more than five more minutes left.

And she'd never thought she'd be so glad that she was the only one with the whacko work ethic—and workload—to be working around midnight. Because anyone else Helena probably would've killed, no matter what she said. In fact, it was probably only fear of Oliver's reaction that'd kept her from killing Felicity in her fuming jealousy here and now. Not at all the mindset of someone who wanted to be saved... but few people ever did want to even admit they needed to be saved from themselves.

Forcing those thoughts aside, Felicity wincingly rolled her chair closer to the desk drawer she had a box of napkins in, and was glad to find the box still mostly full as she tugged the drawer out and reached into grab a wad of the paper products. She passed them into her 'bad' hand and, closing her eyes, pressed them under the bolt, gasping as her still impaled shoulder's immediate heightened protests—DAMMIT! DAMMIT!—but still wrapping under the base of the shaft anyway so she could hold it. Then she used her dominant hand to grab further down the shaft and, after a deep breath, snapped the end off.

SNA-AP!

DAMN!!! IT!!!

Biting back the scream that tried to tear its way up her throat then, and again when she threw
herself forward, Felicity pulled herself free of the bolt that'd been pinning her to her chair with a
sickening sound:

*Squelch ...*

Felicity folded over her lap for several long seconds, pressing the napkins to the front side of her
shoulder as she fought to breathe through the pain. When she made herself gingerly sit up a few
seconds later, the napkins she'd started with were already drenched in the blood wetting the hand
holding them in place. But she could feel her Quickening working still—the sharpness of the pain
steadily dulling again as it was at last able to do its job and actually start getting rid of the hole that
was *not* supposed to be there. So she just kept breathing for a good minute, silently telling her
stomach to stay where it was. Then the rapid flood of blood slowed down, no longer trying to spurt
through the wad of napkins like some sort of gory geyser.

Her chair was still going to be covered in it. Definitely. And her top was definitely a goner. She
almost reached for her scarf, just to see if it'd survived, but stopped herself on the off-chance it had
escaped unstained.

Forcing herself to her feet, Felicity swayed in place for a long moment—the blood loss was always
one of the last things the Quickening fixed after all, and sometimes she wasn't sure how much it
really did there. Or if it even could do much before a hearty meal and a heck of a lot of water—she
was always *so* thirsty after dying, but maybe that was just her. Methos usually wanted beer after
coming back from the dead, but that dehydrated while it intoxicated.

The Immortal had to catch herself on the corner of her desk as she swayed again on her first step,
and grimaced as doing so left a blood smeared handprint there, too. There were probably similar
smears on her keyboard, and all over the rest of her desk, too. She didn't even want to look at her
chair. That smear reminded her to take careful, slow steps and not touch anything as she stumbled
her way to the bathroom. So she had to stop more than once, each time forcing herself to staying
standing—on her feet by both sheer will and the strength of the Quickening she could command
even as it burned through her body to hopefully sear her shoulder shut soon. Thank every deity that
might be out there that she'd worn her panda flats instead of heels today.

Drinking water from the tap was never her preference; because of the taste, not because anything in
it might hurt her. But after she'd washed her hands and her arms, tugged her—indeed ruined—shirt
off, then towel-washed her whole upper body, it seemed like a good idea. And the almost cool
liquid felt positively heavenly as it washed down her throat so she didn't notice if it had any sort of
taste right now.

That quick wash was all she could afford herself, though, so she dried off as best she could,
wrapping the bloody shirt and bloody towels together and then wrapping them again in more paper
towels, along with the napkins that were now all almost purple red rather than white. Blood red. Her blood.

By some miracle her scarf actually wasn't stained. She'd had it wrapped around her neck and settled mostly on her unharmed shoulder, so it escaped even the geyser of blood after she'd freed herself.

Felicity walked back to her office as hastily as she could with her head still feeling a little light, wary of the fact that Oliver was probably going to be here any minute now and she didn't have a shirt on—or an explanation she could give for that that might lead anywhere fun. Fortunately, she always wore layers to work, and the sweater she'd worn over the short-sleeve shirt today, tucked currently in the closet with her coat, would work by itself.

She'd just finished buttoning it up, a bunch of clean towels taped to either side of her shoulder when she heard Oliver calling her name in the hallway.

“Felicity?!?” his voice was weighted with all the worry she'd expected, and she tried not to feel too bad about it as she took a quick glance at the screen that Helena had left up, then bolted for the door, fortunately getting into the doorway just before he did. Tugging her coat on with winces as she went to hopefully keep him from noticing her shoulder.

“Oliver...” Felicity answered him without completely thinking it through, then winced when her voice came out sounding about as weak as she felt.

He was still the Starling City Vigilante now—green leather, arrows, bow, greasepaint and all. But she couldn't not meet his eyes as soon as she stepped out of the server room, closing the door behind her as she did so...

She'd have to erase the footage later. All of it. Good thing the cameras on this floor were already delayed. Should give her more than enough time to make her time her look harmless after she got home.

Oliver's face was relieved—probably at finding her alone and unharmed?—even though his eyes were maelstroms of anger at war with worry as he wrapped his arms around her.

Felicity bit back a gasp as the tight hug put pressure on her still tender shoulder, which was no longer gushing blood, but still very aware it had been. She tucked her face into his neck as he seemed to be trying to pull her into him. Trying to force herself to relax, and mostly succeeding, as
all she had to do was fall into his arms.

In response, Oliver’s hold didn’t tighten—it was already about as tight as he dared since he thought she was oh-so-breakable—but his arms shifted to hold her more securely. Sliding carefully, comfortably around her with the ease that came from watching movies while cuddling and falling asleep with her in his arms a few times before now. Those nights were always about him, but there was no taking without at least a little giving in any relationship that you wanted to work, so she’d shared a lot, too.

Not the big secrets though. Not like the one in the room behind her, displayed by blood everywhere like some sort of macabre painting. Not the last five years of his life or many the youthful mistakes that came before it. Not the last twenty-eight centuries of her life, or all the mistakes she’d made along the way.

After a moment, Oliver pulled back, but he kept an arm around her waist as he looked down at her, cupping her cheek in his opposite palm. “Are you alright?”

“Ye-Yeah,” Felicity stumbled over the confirmation. The lie. No matter how many times she had to tell that lie, it was still always hard to say ‘yes,’ she was ‘okay’ shortly after she’d died—or in this case been badly injured.

It could be worse. She could be scaring the hell out of him by waking up after he’d found her corpse… or waking up after he’d left to avenge her.

Oliver closed his eyes as he shook his head, “I am so sorry,” he murmured, the actual tremor in his voice even more startling than just how softly he was speaking. Neither was much like the man she’d come to know, who kept everything close to the chest. Like he was trying to hold her close, one of his strong arms protectively wrapped around her, encasing her in warmth that her cold, drained body couldn’t help but notice and want even through sweater and coat.

But Felicity was glad to see him working through his emotions, even if gritting his teeth and working his jaw were the only outward signs of that, combined with the tight hold he still had on her, it was something.

As was the kiss he pressed to her forehead a second later.

“It’s not your fault,” Felicity found herself trying to tell him, “She’s—”
“A murderer,” Oliver interrupted, his face carved from stone as he opened his eyes again. “Digg's right.”

“Well, yeah,” Felicity couldn't deny that. "But that's not your fault, Oliver. She's made her own choices.”

He shook his head, “I thought I could change her. I—”

“You thought you could save her,” Felicity corrected gently, reaching up with her right hand, still careful not to move her left shoulder anymore than she had to.

It was still healing beneath the skin that'd rapidly closed over the wound. The scabby scar tissue that would be like new: as soft and unmarred as a baby's by this time tomorrow, but tender until the Quickening had worked its way through every cell. And still unhardened, noticeably too-soft; brand-new, for a few days afterwards. At this rate her shoulder might start making up phantom pains to avoid more being inflicted anytime soon.

“That's not a bad thing.” She reassured him, hurrying on when it looked like he'd object again; because this was not an argument she wanted to have here. Not when she still had her bloody office to clean up just barely out of his sight. “She wanted me to hack the F.B.I Database—”

“For the safe house,” Oliver nodded, brow furrowed. “She's headed there now?”

“No,” Felicity swallowed when he blinked at her, trying to wet her too dry throat. “I-I didn't show her the actual database—I hacked it, yeah, but I replaced the addresses with the local listing of places that just went on the market. Empty houses.”

"How?" The billionaire's brow furrowed even more under the shadows of his hood, but this time in clear confusion rather than the concern he'd previously felt for what, under other circumstances, might otherwise be playing out across town now.

“Computer programs are all code, Oliver,” she smiled as she shook her head slightly again. “They do what you tell them to do, if you know how to tell them to do it. I just told my mirror-site to list the addresses from a local realtor's newest lots rather than the safe-houses' addresses. It looked like what she was expecting, so she bought it.”
Their gazes stayed locked for several long seconds, and the amazed relief blooming in those brightening blues of his made everything she'd suffered tonight worth it.

Her body didn't agree. Her shoulder was still screeching, her throat wanted to drown and the rest of her just wanted to keel over so she could wake up only once she'd mostly healed. But her brain and her heart were in complete agreement all the same.

“Felicity,” Oliver was smiling slightly as he slowly shook his head, “You are remarkable.”

“Thank you for remarking on it,” she returned the same response she had months ago, only this time she saw him glance at her lips as she did so.

It wasn't a good time for kissing, though, so she wasn't overly surprised when he pressed his lips lightly to her forehead again instead, the warm pressure whisper-soft and barely there a moment before he'd pulled back again. She tried not to regret the missed kiss: it wasn't like she would've had an easy time hiding her injury while making out, after all...

“You know where she's going?”

Felicity nodded, before repeating the address she'd just glanced at moments before.

“That's not far,” Oliver was frowning again. “Maybe fifteen minutes.”

Felicity nodded her agreement. “I know,” she said, then frowned herself. “You don't think she'll come back here tonight? She knew you were on your way...”

“I don't know,” Oliver answered, and the aggravation was as clear in his voice as it was on his face. “I don't know what she'll do,” Then he sighed. “I really thought she'd be flying for Rome by now.”

“You mean you hoped she would,” the Immortal pointed out quietly, meeting his eyes unflinchingly when he looked back at her with a wince. Actually a little hard, because the adrenaline crash was hitting her hard, and combined with however much blood she'd lost tonight it left her feeling completely freezing. Not that that was ever hard here—they always kept the server room cold. “There's a difference.”
“Yeah, there is,” the Vigilante agreed, but stiffened then.

It was second before Felicity realized why: she only heard the door to the nearby stairwell close, he’d heard it open. Normally she would have, too. Were there another Immortal’s Quickening Buzzing in her head, she’s have to. But right now just staying upright without shivering was hard. Really hard.

Thankfully, it was Digg that came running around the corner then, and Oliver wasn't on edge enough to throw the fletchette he'd palmed from his jacket before he saw who it was. Though the ex-soldier threw his free hand up in surrender anyway, lowering his gun as he did so. “I got your call. What happened?” he asked, worried eyes focusing on Felicity first.

And probably not missing the fact that she was shivering. Or trembling. Or maybe both? At this point, she couldn’t tell. She really did need to meditate. And sleep. Lots and lots of sleep. Right after a pint or two of water. And some wine.

“Helena,” Oliver growled, the arm he had around her waist tightening just a little; warm and supporting as he too noticed she was shaking. “She wanted Felicity to hack the F.B.I Database.”

“For Bertinelli's safe house,” Digg nodded. “That where she's gone now?”

“No,” Felicity spoke up before Oliver could, not sure she wanted to hear the vigilante's version of what she'd done. Not sure if it'd be worse to find out he actually understood what she'd done, or didn't understand it at all. “I created a dummy site and gave her a fake address—she's going to a new house that just went on the market. On the other side of town.”

Digg's expression was as surprised as it was approving. “Gotta say, I'm impressed,” he shook his head and smiled at her. “You really hold up well under pressure for a tech girl, Felicity.”

“Thanks... I think,” the Immortal replied cautiously; letting a little suspiciousness seep into her tone like she was trying to figure out if she'd just been indirectly insulted, even though the backhanded compliment was just that. A compliment.

And yet another time these two men were realizing she really was more than just an I.T girl. Felicity wondered if there was any way at all she could keep Methos from checking up on her anytime soon... probably not with the news reporting the vigilante and anything similar on a
regular basis.

“I'm gonna try to catch Helena,” Oliver decided, looking at her quickly. “How long—”

“Less than ten minutes before you got here, uh, I think? How long have you been here?” Felicity cut in, and he nodded as he went on.

“I'll try to catch her. Digg, you need to take Felicity home—"

“Wait, what?” Felicity interjected, frowning as he kept talking over her.

“—and stay there till—"

“No he doesn't!” she tried to insist, but the two men kept ignoring her. It was getting annoying—but like everything else she didn’t even seem to have the energy for that reasonable annoyance. Obviously she’d been putting her Quickening through more of a regular workout than she’d realized with her insomnia of late…

”—I get there,” Oliver sighed as he finished issuing the order. “We'll know pretty quickly if...” he finally stopped, frowning as she tugged herself free of the arm he’d still had banded around her waist.

“I can drive myself home!” Felicity insisted firmly, frowning up at him; knowing that she'd be coming across as unreasonably difficult here, but not knowing any other way to make sure she'd be able to clean up the mess that the murderess's temper tantrum left behind if someone was going to either drag her away or stay with her. “Digg should go with you—"

“Felicity,” Oliver interrupted her, catching each of her upper arms with his huge hands. Which felt very warm, steady and strong right now.

And effectively silenced her as she fought not to show how much the firm but gentle handhold near her healing shoulder hurt. Dammit! Dammit! Hoping he didn't notice how she was shaking: shivers and trembles rocking her form.
Though from the way his hold immediately gentled and his eyes softened before he went on, he had noticed. “When Helena realizes you gave her the wrong address, she might come back. You can’t—"

“She doesn’t know where I live!” Felicity protested, but her heart couldn’t be all the way in. Not when she knew he was right and a very small part of her still wished she’d been hit with a kill shot. Even with the odds of exposing her Immortality to far too many in the process… likely resulting in the League quickly cleaning it up if influence alone wasn’t enough. Assuming Mazin still saw to such things and wasn’t planning world domination or something just as stupid instead.

“We don’t know that!” Oliver shot back, surprising her just a little because the anger he was showing—while not uncharacteristic of her vigilante hero—was somewhat atypical being directed right at her. More than somewhat, considering the irritating height his protective instincts had already grown to in the short time they’d been dating as it were. But he reined it in then, pressing his lips firmly together as he visibly forced himself to calm—or at least suppressed that anger, worry, panic, everything back under the cold control she knew he was scarly capable of maintaining.

Really, she’d never met a man who reminded her so much of Methos—or at least the Methos that was acknowledging his long ago, but very long, past as a warrior. Warlord. General. And various variations thereof.

It felt a bit strange that someone she’d been so interested in from the start—from that first moment when their eyes had met—could remind her so much of a man she’d called ‘big brother’ for thousands of years. Certainly it was more strange than the fact that Oliver Queen fit neatly into the same ‘type’ Methos had outlined based on all her past lovers. (Or at least the ones with which love was involved.) Strange and scary, especially since she and Methos had talked a few times about trying to start a romantic relationship, but the easy camaraderie and sibling-like love between them just didn’t translate to lovers. The chemistry wasn’t there, and they knew each other too well for either of them to try faking it till it started to work.

“We don’t know what she knows about you, Felicity,” Oliver continued with forced calm, shaking his head.

He clearly wanted to be out after the Huntress already but knowing better than to just leave his girlfriend like this, too. Or, if he didn’t know better, his self-hatred and guilt were still overpowering his anger. Again, so like Methos it was mind boggling.

“Maybe she never noticed you before Tommy pointed you out last night. Maybe she only found you here by luck, because she thought any tech expert I knew had to work at Q.C. We don’t know.” He shook her a little then, so gently it she barely felt it shift her shoulders.
But one of those shoulders was still painfully problematic, so again it took every fiber of control she had built through millennia to not let her pain show past her biting the inside of her lower lip in what she hoped was mistaken for nervousness as her injury protested pangingly.

"...Please," he added on quietly, surprising her a little once again.

Felicity stared back at him for a long moment, then finally—reluctantly nodded. “Okay,” she agreed quietly. Trying all the while not to resent the fact that she'd have to sneak back here in the predawn hours to clean everything up before anyone else came in. Very glad that she'd said 'hi' to the janitors on her way back in earlier, as they were leaving this floor for the night.

“Thank you,” Oliver breathed, cupping her cheek in one big, warm palm again, one solid moment of steady warmth that she couldn't help but lean into. Then he was transferring her to Digg (when had he gotten so close?) before he was moving away—all the warmth and protectiveness he'd been radiating leaving just as quickly with him, making the area around her feel suddenly colder and darker.

“Oliver, what are you going to do?” Digg called after him, the huge arm he had wrapped around her somehow not as warm or as safe feeling as the archer’s. Not that he wouldn't protect her, of course, it was just the emotional safety she really shouldn't associate with either of them after so short an acquaintance refused to not be felt around Oliver Queen with an intensity that shouldn’t surprise her.

Not when ‘intensity’ was definitely one of her new boyfriend’s defining characteristics. (And also one of the key descriptors of her ‘type,’ as Methos would say once they met.)

“What I should have done in the first place,” Oliver snarled in reply, the words growled so low that he sounded like he did when he was 'the Hood' using the voice-modulator, despite the fact that she knew he'd never turned it on even though he'd shown up here hood, arrows and all.

Digg nodded his approval as he holstered his gun, though he didn't clip it in place. And one hand stayed on it as he started shepherding her with the other.

Felicity, though, couldn't help but frown after her boyfriend.

Methos, she knew, would say she'd become much too soft—and the two mortal men who'd become
so dear to her in the last few months would probably agree. But it didn't sit well with her; the thought of anyone dying only for hurting her. Not even that, since Oliver didn't know she was hurt. While the nearest comparison she could make to Helena Bertinelli's mental state the mindset of a rabid wolf—dogged and dangerous—anyone dying just for threatening Felicity never seemed quite right to her. No matter how little sleep she was going to get tonight.

There was a time she’d wanted vengeance. She’d called it justice—Immortal justice. But Methos had been right to stop her from going down that road. From devoting all the power and resources of an empire to hunting down one woman who was already long gone. All of the empire would’ve called it justice. Cassandra hadn’t just committed murder in cold-blood when she’d poisoned Felicitas’s first family, she’d wiped out more than half of the royal family. But if she’d let herself start down that path: utilized her power for her personal pain, would she have ever stopped?

Truly, she didn’t know.

That and the threat of what would happen if she’d had her way had stayed her hand then. Because if she’d had Cassandra hunted down and taken her head while consumed by her own hatred and need for revenge, she may well have become Cassandra. That was the way the Dark Quickenings worked. Now the difference in age between them wasn’t remotely significant, but back then the woman had had more than a century on her.

It wasn’t the same thing for mortals, but the sentiments behind them were the same… It’d be one thing if it was taking Helena Bertinelli out of the picture was something he’d been willing to consider before: it was the difference between justice and revenge. Necessity and fury. Certainty and doubt. Remorse and regret.

The first time Oliver had met Helena Bertinelli was when he was trying to find the one who'd almost killed his mother. He'd found her—and forgiven her. And he hadn't been willing to harm her even after she'd returned to threaten his family. He hadn't touched her after she'd hurt Tommy. It was only because she'd gone after Felicity this time that he was finally deciding to act.

And it was something he could all too easily, and very quickly, come to regret.

Felicity did not want to be the cause of one more reason Oliver would hate himself a little more in the future. But she knew better than to protest at this point. Knew that the sight of her still trembling from what they'd think was aftershock, adrenaline crash, or both all mixed together, wouldn't help her calm Oliver down. Quite the reverse. So she stayed quiet as the three of them waited through the elevator's slow drop down to the top of the parking garage, a little surprised he hadn’t jumped down the stairs instead or something like that.
Except she noticed again then that he was in his full green leather ensemble still, and groaned before she started looking for her purse. Which Digg had taken from her even before they were headed for the elevators, though she couldn't remember when she'd even grabbed it on her way out of her bloody office. Fortunately she had, as she couldn't exactly tell them to take her back up there and they'd never let her go back alone. Not now.

“What is it?” Oliver asked her too softly for his voice modulator to make him sound meaner. That artificial growl didn't bother her at all anyway, she'd heard it too many times by now. The combination of recognition and familiarity encouraged fondness rather than the opposite.

“Cameras,” Felicity sighed as she finally fished her phone out. “I looped them on my floor already, but the garage—”

“Only the entrances are monitored,” Oliver reminded her. “And the east one’s still broken.”

“The elevators are monitored too, now,” Felicity told him, squinting down at the screen to double-check she’d picked the right setting—specifically one she’d setup in case she ever had to fight a headhunter here in the garage—before she activated it. “There, all set,” she said with another sigh, dropping her device back in the bag Digg was still so helpfully holding open for her before she tried to stand there like she didn’t want to just lie down in the elevator and sleep for a week. Or die. Either would work for her right now.

“What’d you just do?” Oliver asked her after a moment more of descending silence.

“Looped the cameras there for the next half hour,” Felicity replied, glancing at the floor numbers from sheer curiosity. And some surprise—this elevator took about as long now as it did during the day when it was stopping on more than a few floors in between the I.T Department and wherever it was that she was going normally.

The executive elevator was a far faster, of course, but Oliver using the I.D card he probably wasn't carrying—or, worse, the biometric scanner while he was suited up as the infamous Vigilante would be a bad idea in more ways than one. The only other Q.C employees they might run into anyway were the security guards, since they were the only ones that while here weren't expected to be sleeping for the most part, but that wasn't likely. Unlike the guards at Merlyn Global Tower, security here didn't do routine patrols even at night, never mind during the day. They did that first headcount when they locked up at night to see who was here, but the only time she saw them after that was when she was leaving or going at odd hours or if it was one of the younger ones that liked to try flirting with her from time to time. Other than that, they all seemed to just watch the lobby, their cameras also on the first floor, and maybe check if any alarms happened to go off. Maybe, she couldn't be sure on the last part really since she hadn't found any record of that even on the night Walter Steele was kidnapped, but common sense said that'd be the sort of thing that'd be expected
of them. These days they seemed to patrol the lobby at least.

It was only after they'd sunk through a few more floors in silence for those several long seconds that Diggle slowly asked, “From your phone?”

Felicity finally forced herself to look between the two of them, her expression tightly controlled. “It’s all I have with me right now unless you want to go back up to the I.T Department. I’ll double-check it from home.” At the disbelief both men were doing bad jobs of hiding, she sighed again. “I didn’t just write it. I activated it.”

“With your phone,” Oliver said it this time, sounding only a little less surprised than his bodyguard.

“Yes,” the genius replied with a firm nod. Then she was unable to stop a wince when that made her shoulder pang and her head swim, but tried to cover it up by speaking even as she looked towards the wall while she closed her eyes to let her inner ear settle. “From my phone.”

Of course it didn't work. Stuck in a slowly sinking room with nothing to do but wait for them to finally reach the parking garage, Oliver was of course watching her. Even though he was waiting to leave on the warpath, he had to wait and he was already worried about her. So he noticed that wince.

“Hey, are you okay?” he turned his frown all the way towards her with such clear concern there in his eyes that it made her feel both better and worse all at the same time.

“I’ll be fine,” the Immortal answered evenly, heart sinking when their descent finally stopped at the ground-level of the parking garage.

There, Diggle dropping his coat around her shoulders almost distracted her from watching sadly as the billionaire gave her one more worried frown before he stormed over to his bike without looking back again, all but slammed his helmet on, and took off like the building was about to blow up.

She let Diggle put her in the front passenger’s seat of the Queen car that Oliver seemed to almost never ride in, putting her seatbelt on and whispering a “Thank you,” when he turned the heat up immediately after he’d started the engine. But thereafter ignoring each and every concerned glance her friend darted her way, and trying not to think too much as he drove her home.
'Trying' being the key word there. Her mind had never been very good at turning off, and it wasn't doing any better tonight with so much to think about.

Oliver might be about to put an arrow in Helena Bertinelli. For her. If the Huntress wasn't wise enough to hightail it out of town as soon as she saw the safe house was empty. She *had* to know the Vigilante might come after her now.

Assuming, of course, that the League had backed as far off as they seemed to have.

And what did it mean, that they'd followed her commands regarding breaking Bertinelli out to the letter, but hadn't bothered to warn her when the woman had deviated didn't react the way she was expected to?

What did it mean regarding the student who'd long called her his 'sister' and the Pre-Immortal who now called her 'aunt'? The Pre-Immortal that looked like she could impossibly be a biological daughter of Mazin and his far too short-lived wife...

Then there was also another Immortal living here in her city besides. One she hadn't known and invited.

Along with the Pre-Immortal honor would never let her abandon once she'd met him even if he hadn't already been conveniently on his way to becoming a part of her current life.

And whether it'd be better to call Methos about all of this before he decided to just show up. Though the prank she'd played on him tonight when she'd ignored his call might well have taken that decision out of her hands. Either he'd respond in kind—with a prank of his own—or he'd visit soon. She already knew he was worried. That was the only reason he would've risked getting the Watchers to send a surveillance team here. Probably as a result of her visiting him for a weekend of painful sparing...

There was a part of her that would be beyond relieved to see her brother again. That part that remained of the young woman who, in ancient times gone by, had learned to hide her fears behind a royal mask. All of them. Even crazy swordsmen and the idea of eternity had to be faced with a pretty smile beneath her crown... and these days she didn't wear a real crown anymore, but the lessons of old still served her well. They always would.

But another part of being a ruling queen had been all the warriors who were sworn to her. Of all
those men, only Methos remained.

Yet she couldn't ask him to come.

Not before she told Oliver the truth.

Before José's betrayal, telling a man she loved about her Immortality had never really been hard. Explaining it all, and almost always having to prove it in some bloody, dramatic fashion, was never something she'd looked forward to. But knowing when to tell them had always come easily to her...

Till that terrible death in Spain. Until she'd ignored those instincts and paid for it by burning again—that time without any means to ease or escape the pain.

Those same instincts told her to trust Oliver Queen. Told her to tell him—far earlier in their relationship than she'd ever told any of her previous lovers, save one. And Alexandros had figured it out himself, before he'd started seducing her after they'd met for the second time—when he was a king, decades after that time she'd saved him as a small child. Avoiding the man he'd become—a tactical genius and conqueror the world would never forget—had been impossible...

But that was a long time ago. La Década Ominosa, was not.

So even though ignoring her instincts was what'd gotten her tied to that stake in the first place, the idea of confessing all again still made her feel like she was tied up and choking on smoke.

"Hey," Digg's brow was furrowed when he finally broke the silence as he turned the car off the highway exit that was closest to her house. "You okay?"

The clear concern all over the big man only made swallowing back the bad memories harder, all the guilt not helping her clear her throat. But she did have a lot of practice. And telling Oliver almost certainly meant telling Diggle, too, so there was at least not added guilt there.

"No." Felicity admitted softly, able to keep the pain from her voice, but not all of that regret.

Diggle sighed. "The woman is crazy, Felicity."
She blinked, but answered anyway as she looked away. "I know."

"She's already killed plenty of people herself. Even more indirectly. Even if you ignore all the mobsters she got with the mob war that Oliver barely managed to stop, she never cared about innocents getting caught in the crossfire anyway," the ex-soldier's scowl of disapproval was directed towards the road, but she could still see it. "Supposedly she was sorry, but not enough to even try and avoid it."

"I know," Felicity said again, spotting another landmark that told her they weren't far from home now.

The bodyguard kept going anyway, his deep voice calm and matter-of-fact, but understanding, too. "Now she's coming after people Oliver cares about, and she knows way too much about him for that to be let go."

"I know."

"This is all on her, Felicity," her friend went on adamantly. "Oliver already gave her more chances then he should have. Now she's burned all those bridges."

The Immortal couldn't help but flinch at the word 'burned,' swallowing back the bitter taste of smoke that she knew was just in her mind—born from bad memories she'd prefer to forget but couldn't. So she just kept looking for, and finding, familiar landmarks outside the window.

"Her death's on her, Felicity," Digg insisted again. "Not even Oliver, really, not after all the times he's tried to help her. And not in any way on you."

When he didn't go on after that, clearly waiting for her to respond, Felicity made herself look back at her friend as she answered again. "Digg, I know. Really. I do."

He held her gaze for what felt like a long time, though it was really just as long as that last long stretch of open road before they turned into her section of suburbia. Still not saying anything, still waiting, so she sighed.
"I do know that," Felicity reassured him again. "I do. I just really hope Oliver does, too."

The bodyguard sighed himself at that, but still didn't say anything more.

This time because there was nothing more to say. They'd both watched their teammate destroy himself over much less comparatively. Both with the incredible physical exercises he sometimes worked himself to the point of exhaustion with, and that more than occasionally self-hating mindset that made him do it. That made him keep going past the point that was healthy, that was to keep himself in peak physical condition. That was all punishment he inflicted upon himself for who knew what.

That thought, however, was what finally decided her. On the League, at least. She'd give Nyssa al Ghul the chance to prove that the League of Assassins and the League of Shadows were still one and the same. Because, here and now, it was the only thing she could do.

Once they got back to her house, anyway, so she could use the League phone without Diggle noticing she was carrying a second phone—one that looked much more like military hardware than your average cell phone. Not that her personal phone was in anyway way average even before she'd redesigned it. But her friend, like her boyfriend, would notice. Thus she had to make herself wait, and hope that Oliver didn't do anything that'd make him hate himself more than he already did in the meantime.

Sometimes more than others she really hated waiting.

Digg glanced at her again just as he turned onto her street a moment later. "He didn't tell you about the door, did he?"

Felicity blinked, then frowned. "What door?"

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. The confrontation has happened. Sorry to those of you that wanted a Crossbow vs. Sword showdown at QC. While it could've been really awesome, I couldn't see it working so well for the story just yet. But don't worry: the changes AFTER this only get more dramatic for Helena, which was not so vaguely hinted at. Really, we might even feel bad for her soon. Maybe. Unlikely though that may seem at this point...
Anyway, hopefully this appealed to those of you that've stuck with me for so long.
There's obviously more to come, and the wait shouldn't be too long. I can't work on it at all this weekend, since I'm going to be insanely busy (and thus why I rushed to get this out tonight instead of making you wait till Monday or Tuesday—please let me know if I missed any major errors while editing). Either way, it shouldn't be too long. Comments, ideas, suggestions, etc. are always appreciated! And they really do help. Even if it's just to remind me that I'm not struggling with the scene just for myself. Though some of you have been amazing all the way through, so thank you very much. And, to all of you just quietly reading along: thank you, too. Don't be afraid to speak up if something strikes your fancy, please. But sometimes I have nothing to say, too...

*glances back at latest chapter* *shrugs* Sometimes. Really.
Bye for now. :-D

Jess S
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Well, I survived both my summer’s job’s most hectic weekend and many of my relatives showing up for the following holiday. (Always fun, but very tiring. At least this year they didn’t ALL show up at once, AND they even came on a separate weekend from opening day!) And now I can start posting again! Yay! LOL, anyway, this next scene probably isn’t what at least a few of you are expecting, but I hope you enjoy it anyway! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Diggle’s P.O.V.

John glanced towards the bedroom again when he heard the bathroom door in there reopen once more, waiting a second before he called, “Hey, everything okay?”

When he’d secured the perimeter he hadn’t seen any reason not to let her wash up and get ready for bed. He’d been pleasantly surprised to find the townhouse was pretty secure on its own. He’d have to talk to her about actually turning her alarm system on when she left—it worked better that way. But the attack hadn’t even been here tonight, and she was stressed out enough so there was no reason to bring it up now. The door their vigilante had busted through wasn’t even a problem in the strictest sense of the word anymore, not after the not so difficult repair he’d been able to manage with the tools she’d surprised him with not even a minute after they arrived. After all, he was staying here at least until Oliver came back from hunting his ex, and after that he wouldn’t be too shocked if the other man didn’t decide to either move in here or try to convince Felicity to move to the mansion.

It’d be beyond early in their relationship for that sort of move, officially, but where the blonde’s safety was concerned that didn’t matter. To Oliver or his bodyguard. But he could still almost hear the argument like it was already happening.

Their I.T genius would of course say that the only attack on her townhouse had been in the form of her vigilante breaking through the kitchen door that the bodyguard had fixed as best as he could. Again, Felicity’s preparedness had surprised him—though it probably shouldn’t have—because she didn’t have a handyman to call the next day: she had all the equipment necessary to fix the door herself. Though she hadn’t minded entrusting the task to him tonight, and it was the only weak-point until he was done, so he’d worked on it while she’d taken her shower.
While both of them waited for either a call or the arrival of their archer. Neither one of them was happy not knowing, but somehow giving the insomniac the excuse of work to brew coffee in the middle of the night—early morning, really—did not seem like a good idea at all. Despite how well she’d taken being threatened by Oliver’s ex: to the point where the bodyguard wasn’t really sure she was letting herself realize how much danger she’d been in with a psychotic madwoman pointing that crossbow at her. She hadn’t broken down, or even seemed to come close to it so far. In fact, he hadn’t even really worried about her in the shower—save for the time the lights had flickered, but that must’ve been something with the power grid. She did live pretty close to the Glades, just like John himself did.

Felicity had been quiet since she’d given in and let Oliver send her home with his bodyguard protecting her, but she hadn’t been too quiet. Her calmness hadn’t seemed faked or forced to him. Other than being a bit pale, the only signs of stress John had really seen were when she’d briefly accepted comfort from Oliver himself, and when she’d started shivering in the garage. But the second one could’ve been because it was the middle of the night in March and it was cold.

All in all, John didn’t know what to make of this genius that’d apparently liked to build computers and play with swords as a girl. An I.T girl shouldn’t be expected to handle what’d happened to her tonight well. But she hadn’t shed a single tear in the car, and he didn’t think she’d been crying in the shower either—she wasn’t in there long enough and she hadn’t looked close to tears at any time tonight. She handled everything—not just the Huntress, everything involved with the insanity of being in on Oliver Queen’s dangerous secret—as well as any combat hardened soldier, even though she was just a pretty computer genius who happened to like swords but didn’t like to show off.

“I’m fine,” Felicity’s tired reply didn’t force him from those thoughts, almost late enough to make him worry more.

But the weariness in her voice was obviously what was slowing her down—and it was almost two o’clock in the morning—so the bodyguard let it slide. He was tired himself. And unlike her, apparently, he’d been getting regular sleep before this. She hadn’t.

John had just finished putting the tools away in Felicity’s pretty impressive toolkit when the woman herself padded back out, brushing her hair as she did so. He gave her a quick once-over without even thinking about it.

Freshly showered and changed into what was obviously a very warm set of winter P.Js, the blonde looked a lot better than she had when he’d first gotten her home. A lot of her color had returned, so she wasn’t ghostly pale anymore, but her overall weariness still seemed to have drained away a lot of her usual vibrancy. She still looked very, very tired, and clearly trying not to let the strain show even though she had every right to be stressed after what’d happened.
“I’m fine, Digg,” Felicity repeated firmly, giving him a soft smile. She turned towards the stove. “I’m having some hot cocoa. Want some?”

“Sure,” he agreed, and then held the closed toolkit aloft. “You want this back in the crawlspace?”

“Yes, please,” the blonde replied as she glanced towards the repaired door. “Nice work—good as new.”

John shrugged as he made his way over to the opening that served as a sort of entryway to the space beneath the wooden floors. “Easy to do with all the supplies,” he replied, placing the toolbox back where he’d gotten it, before shaking his head at all the extra hardware and wood to be found there even as he put the panel back and unfolded the rug that then hid it from sight. “Mind if I ask why you even have everything you need to fix your door a few times over?”

“No.” Felicity was focused on the milk she was pouring onto the pot by sight, no sign of the measuring cup he knew she had from watching her bake before. Though she did grab a tablespoon to measure out the cocoa she started stirring in as the stove heated it up. “Never know when you might need some repairs around the house. I like to be prepared.”

Made sense and sounded reasonable, but his memories of how much Lyla had hated doing repairs around the house herself had him looking at her still. And the cause of the light shadows beneath her eyes—all that time she’d been working way too much to ever have the time to spare for household repairs—made it seem unlikely. She had to have someone stopping by for general housework anyway.

“But you have someone you call for it?” John pressed, more from curiosity than anything else. “Normally, I mean?”

The blonde snorted. “Why would I need to call someone?” she raised an eyebrow at him. “There’s fifteen other houses just on my street, and among my neighbors there’s two professional plumbers, an electrician a carpenter, a builder, and a landscaper. Between all of them and the others, sometimes, heaven help me if I ever did have some other company’s van parked outside my house. Except if it’s animal control, I suppose, since we don’t have anyone from the S.C.P.D here other than Nick.”

John snorted, shaking his head in amusement. “And how many of them are single?” He asked, sitting down at the kitchen table by the newly put back together door.
“Oh only Matt and Zack,” Felicity started to shrug, winced, then focused on stirring the pot again as she added. “And Nick, but he doesn’t count—he should get back together with his ex-girlfriend eventually.”

“Pretty sure Oliver might not like an S.C.P.D detective hanging around much more than ‘Matt and Zack’ anyway,” John pointed out dryly.

Felicity actually chuckled. “Oh, I don’t think Matt would bother him. He’s gay.”

“And Zack?”

“Zack might bother him,” the blonde admitted, still stirring—still noticeably careful of her shoulder now. “He’s a big flirt, but he’s out at sea most of the time.”

“Navy?”

“No, fishing. And lobsters, sometimes.”

John blinked, “Around here?”

Sure, he knew they were right on one of the Great Lakes, but they weren’t exactly seas. And he thought most of the lobsters he never bothered to buy were so expensive because they came from Maine.


“Why’s he live here in Starling then?”

“He grew up here. And his sister, Lynn, still lives here—but she’s getting married soon. This summer. And I think she’s already bought her brother’s share of the house. What he’d let her pay anyway. They had a big argument about it last Fourth of July, but he finally let her and Eric give him some amount for it.” Felicity winced again as she lifted the pot off the burner, setting it to the
side before she turned the stove off.

John had already grabbed three mugs out of the nearby cupboard for her by the time she turned towards it.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile, wincing again when she went to pick up the pot again.

“Here, I’ll get it,” John reached for it, waiting till she let go with clear reluctance before he picked it up and started to pour into the mugs. Though the cocoa for Oliver stayed simmering on the stove, assuming neither one of them wanted to drink it before he finally got here.

“Thanks,” she said again, her smile slightly forced as she accepted her drink, spooning a few marshmallows out of a whole container full of them before she pushed said container closer to him.

John finished pouring his, then after taking a few of the little sugar pills himself he followed her to the couch in the living room before he asked, “Your shoulder still bothering you?” he watched her suppress a wince as he sipped some chocolate.


“It’s the stress, too,” he told her. “Probably reminded you of when you were attacked?”

That’d be normal, which Felicity Smoak was not. That was becoming clearer to him every day he knew her.

She visibly thought about the question for a moment, sipping her cocoa. “No,” she shook her head then. “Not really.”

John stared at her for a very long breath, because that hesitation hadn’t displayed any sign of doubt. And what it had displayed was that surprised second of someone needing to think through something they hadn’t already considered, and half a second more of pondering over whether it was something she should’ve thought of before. Coming from the brilliant woman before him, that she hadn’t even considered it was a surprise. Especially since she put so much thought into all of Oliver’s missions, spotting and thinking of problems that the archer and the ex-soldier never thought to consider more than once already.
It shouldn’t be surprising. A nice girl—no matter how bright—shouldn’t automatically accept the rigors of high stress situations with the do-or-die aplomb of someone who’d been there before. She hadn’t been. From what John knew, she’d grown up in the city most famous for gambling, enrolled early and shot through M.I.T, and then taken a job here in Starling that didn’t deserve her. And, at some point, she’d started playing with swords.

But she handled the vigilante—handled everything—so easily that John often forgot that. Now, though, that puzzle—unsolved and full of pieces that didn’t make sense—stunned him again. As did his own reaction to it: because he should be surprised that she wasn’t still in shock, not that she hadn’t already analyzed what the events of last few hours meant to her and everybody else.

He could see she was telling the truth. Entirely. To his recollection she hadn’t ever outright lied to him or Oliver, though she’d probably left more than a few important pieces left unsaid.

So tonight hadn’t reminded her of her last traumatic experience, that was plain to see even if it didn’t make much sense. The harder part, though it wasn’t any better hidden, was that neither event seemed to be particularly traumatic to her. Like she had nothing to fear from a crazy woman with a crossbow or some punk with a knife…

But that couldn’t be it. Felicity Smoak was much too smart not to know that either weapon could kill her just as easily as one had hurt her.

After a few more sips of hot cocoa through though, studying her all the while, John took another sip before he commented, “This is good.”

“Thank you,” she answered softly, sipping some more from her own cup.

They were both quiet for a few long moments, sipping their cocoa, before she started towards the sofa and he followed.

John’s eyes fell on the nearest lamp as he sat down next to her, and he told her almost as an afterthought, “You might wanta have that electrician stop by soon.”

Felicity blinked at him over her mug. “Why?”
“Lights flickered a few times while you were in the shower,” the former soldier shrugged, taking another sip before he added. “Didn’t look like they did outside, but none of your neighbors are still up. Water and electricity aren’t the best mix.”

“Oh, that,” the blonde looked away as she took another small sip, savoring it before she finished, “Jake already looked. Everything’s safe.”

John frowned at her lightly, not quite sure what to make of her phrasing, but she spoke up again before he could say anything about it. Forcing him to file that thought away along with his wondering whether her medieval fantasy stuff—maybe combined with the awe inspiring control of tech she’d demonstrated more than once—might’ve left her with little to no survival instincts. She had signed on to help the infamous vigilante with his mission without much argument at all, even if she was supposedly only staying to help find Walter Steele.

“Have you heard from Oliver yet?” she asked him, clearly changing the subject.

That made him snort. “Thought that was why you took your cell into the bathroom with you? Case he called?”

Felicity’s frown could barely be called that. “He could’ve still called you.”

The ‘he probably would’ve preferred to call you in this situation’ was left unsaid. Whether the semi-repaired doorway was an issue or not. And—as another odd thing tonight—John wasn’t sure that it really was. The door propped into its splintered frame had barely been treated with a frown and sigh when they walked in earlier. Then she’d asked him if he’d minded handling a quick-fix and, after showing him where her extensive collection of tools and hardware was hidden under the floor, headed for her shower.

The bodyguard sighed and shook his head again as he admitted, “Nope. Haven’t heard from him yet.” He grimaced, setting his still half-full mug of chocolatey goodness aside on the nearest coaster for now. “We’ve gotta work on the open-comm procedures while he’s active.”

Felicity sighed, also shaking her head again. “It’s only been a few months since he came home. Since he started working with you, let alone me.”

“And he was on his own for a while,” John nodded. “Yeah, I know,” he shook his head again. “Doesn’t mean its right.”
“I didn’t say that it was.”

After a moment, the bodyguard suggested mildly. “We could check the news,” he shrugged when she raised an eyebrow at him. “They’ve heard about the Vigilante’s exploits a few times before us.”

Felicity snorted. “That’s not exactly comforting,” she complained, even as she set her own hot cocoa down on a nearby mug before reaching for the remote on the coffee table to turned the television on with that hand, muting it even before she started surfing the local channels for any sign of unwanted breaking news stories. “If we’d gone back to the Arrow Cave I could’ve opened the channel remotely, or at least kept track of him by G.P.S, or—”

“And not gotten a wink of sleep tonight, I know,” John held her gaze till she looked back to the television with a sigh. Though he could tell she wasn’t paying any more attention to whatever the muted programming was about than he was. “He’ll check in soon,” he tried to reassure her, not knowing if it was necessarily true but hoping it was.

Because her boyfriend clearly mattered more than the door he’d broken through, something that didn’t really surprise him either. She’d certainly already more than proven that any inconvenience to herself was negligible next to helping others. Not just in her long hours at work, but in to the extent she was willing to go to help every night, too.

Felicity accepted that with a little nod, setting the remote down on the middle couch cushion between them before she reached for her hot chocolate again.

John noticed again that she was clearly avoiding using her right hand. Avoiding using that shoulder, which was making her wince again—undoubtedly because tonight had strained it somehow if it wasn’t just because it’d brought back bad memories. But she’d already dodged that inquiry, so he didn’t try it again: not wanting to upset her when she really should be going to sleep sooner rather than later. Instead, he picked up his cocoa again.

The stress had to be what was making her shoulder hurt now, unless she’d somehow hurt herself again. When he’d seen her at the club opening last night the dress she was wearing had completely bared both her shoulders for all to see, with no sign of the painful injury that’d been there not too long before. No sign of a scar, even: though that had to be the result of well-applied concealer or something like that. She’d moved far too easily for any injury to still be hiding under make-up last night, and her boyfriend’s protectiveness had to have had at least something to do with why she’d worn a dress that would display that healed injury. Still, stress could bring on the sensations of phantom pains from a formerly painful injury, so even if tonight hadn’t brought back bad memories
that seemed likely. Unless Oliver’s psycho ex had hurt it for her—but surely she would’ve said something if that was the case?

Then again, she hadn’t told them when someone else had attacked her. Had cut her.

That made John look at her in concern again, and he blinked when he saw that his friend’s eyes weren’t focused on the T.V, him, or her hot cocoa anymore. Instead, she was doing something on her phone again. “Anything?” he asked her, not bothering with being surprised.

“Hmm?” she blinked at him for barely a second before she shook her head. “Oh, I’m not texting Oliver.”

John waited for her to go on, but when her eyes only went back to her phone and stayed there, he asked a few long moments later. “You’re not?”

Honestly texting wasn’t the first thing he’d think of after he’d watched her apparently reset *Queen Consolidated’s* security cameras from her phone inside an elevator barely over an hour before. And even before that he didn’t think he would’ve assumed her incapable of doing anything she wanted with any technological device she had on hand at the time. It was more the thought that she could do so in an elevator that’d surprised him so much earlier.

“No,” the genius replied distractedly. “I’m checking in with a friend.”

John found himself blinking at her again, before he glanced at the nearby clock and then back at her again. “At almost three o’clock in the morning?”

“She texted first,” Felicity told him. “When I was in the shower.” She finished tapping out a message with her thumb’s movements almost a blur over the screen before she went on. “She’s not from Starling. Her brain’s probably still in her timezone.”

“Uh-huh…” John watched her for a moment, then asked, “Everything okay?”

In his experience, most friends wouldn’t call or text in the middle of the night unless it was an emergency. Whether they were from another timezone or not.
The blonde didn’t answer right away this time, but the frown she was directing at her phone looked more distracted than worried so he waited for her brain to come back home again instead of pressing further. That frown was somewhat worry, however—because after a few minutes of rapid-fire texting the concerns wrinkling her brow a little bit started to smooth out. When she finally set her phone aside and reached for her likely lukewarm cocoa she looked a lot more relaxed, so he felt better asking her again then.

“Everything okay?”

Felicity blinked at him over her cocoa as she took a sip, but she was nodding even before she’d lowered the mug. “I think so.”

That might make him feel better if she hadn’t made ‘think’ sound like ‘hope.’

“Most friends don’t call you in the middle of the night unless it’s an emergency,” John observed lightly, hoping everything was alright anyway. The last thing the genius insomniac needed was more problems to keep her from sleeping.

“Some friends do,” the blonde carefully shrugged the shoulder she hadn’t injured previously. “And family, too…”

Sounded like this late night—or early morning—texter fit the former more than the latter, which didn’t fit with the background check that Oliver had read him in on. John wasn’t going to be the one to bring that up though. He wasn’t the one dating her, and no matter how well she’d taken the broken door Oliver leaving him to tell her about it didn’t make him want to tell her something that might upset her much more. Instead he fished a little, “Family?”

“Um-hum,” Felicity nodded again, finishing off her hot chocolate to set the empty mug aside again. She didn’t say anymore, and again the bodyguard wasn’t going to bring up any mention of the background check her billionaire boyfriend had done on her months before he started dating him, so he let it go.

If this friend was family, it did somewhat explain why Felicity went out of her way to answer in the middle of the night, after all, and she seemed more calm now, anyway, so it wasn’t worth upsetting her when he was hoping she’d either decide to head to bed soon or nod off right here.

Besides the suspicion that’d started sinking in a while ago was like an anchor now. An anchor that
shouldn’t exist, and in a fair world wouldn’t, but the world wasn’t fair. ‘Cept maybe back in pre-school, but even there fights broke out over toys that caused tears and tantrums, and the bullying brats weren’t always punished by their blind, or proud, parents.

Felicity Smoak was a computer genius. A genius in general, really. Maybe the brightest individual John Diggle had ever met. In brain power, and certainly in personality. She was the kind of friend you had to wonder why you couldn’t have met them years ago, and had to treasure all the more. Irreplaceable.

But she didn’t see herself that way.

She recognized her own talents and expected everyone else to also, but somehow that didn’t translate into enough self-worth to run back inside when she was attacked outside the nightclub. Somehow she made herself take the Huntress in stride, and the broken door the same night. Like she couldn’t bring herself to waste the energy worrying about herself that much, even though two of the three could’ve resulted in her death all too easily.

So the words Felicity sighed a moment later were a relief to hear her say, “I should get to bed.”

Really she should’ve gone to bed a while ago, but she already knew that so there was no reason for her friend pointing out.

“Probably should,” John agreed.

“I have a meeting with Missus Queen in….” she grimaced as she looked at the clock. “A little over six hours.”

The time, combined with how little sleep she’d gotten lately—and the light shadows under her eyes that weren’t being hidden by her glasses right now—had the ex-soldier grimacing, too. “Oliver could call her for you.” John had been the one to point out to the billionaire that that was exactly the sort of thing she’d undoubtedly wanted to avoid, and why she hadn’t asked for his help as the Queen family’s company, the frown saying that earned him wasn’t at all unexpected.

Felicity snorted, “That’d make a great impression.”

Instead of offended, she sounded a little amused with the idea, though she clearly had no intention
of letting it play out. But that, too, was definitely Oliver’s minefield to sprint through.

“So call her yourself and leave a voicemail tonight,” John shrugged. “Or leave a message with her assistant in the morning.” He understood her wariness of the Queen matriarch—he’d be encouraging it if Felicity wasn’t dating the woman’s son.

Whatever Moira Queen was up to, that she was an understandably protective mother couldn’t be denied. Doubted a bit sometimes, with everything she’d let her daughter get away with, and her son years before. But supposedly daughters’ weren’t supposed to get along with their mothers’—especially in their rebellious teen years. And the bodyguard would admit that if the woman had managed any degree of control over her son at all before The Gambit, not a fighter then or not, it was still a minor miracle. Which was why he couldn’t see her disapproving of her son’s smart, responsible girlfriend. He could appreciate it, even, because that approval should put Felicity into the small, protective sphere of the family… whether the genius herself wanted it or not.

“No.” Felicity answered firmly, her sigh sounding tired but her tone resolute. “If I’m going to be working with Oliver’s mother, I can’t start off with a cancelled appointment.”

“Felicity, you were attacked last night. At work.” John reminded her. “I get you not wanting to use your boyfriend as a get-out-of-jail-free-card,” he assured her, not adding that said boyfriend probably didn’t and wouldn’t get it. “But any boss would understand you needing to take a day.”

“But I don’t need to take a day, I’m fine,” Felicity told him just as firmly as before. Then she shook her head. “Besides, the whole thing last night didn’t happen.”

“What…” John trailed off out of the question as his brain caught up with him. “You erased the security footage,” he remembered her saying something about that in the elevator.

After she’d done something on her phone, which worked inside said elevator… and completely screwed up his plans for making sure Queen Consolidated’s nighttime security was considerably upgraded. Supposedly it had been after their C.E.O was kidnapped while inside the building, but whoever was on duty tonight had never noticed that a wanted criminal was in the building. Well, two of them: but the one that’d been pointing a crossbow at an employee for a while was the one that mattered. The one that could and would have hurt her if the crazy urge to do so had hit her at any time.

“They still should’ve seen it while it was happening, Felicity,” the bodyguard pointed out gruffly. How long some security guards would last against the Huntress was debatable, and they would’ve just been in the way by the time The Vigilante and Digg himself got there, but if they’d been there
sooner it could’ve forced the bitch to leave Felicity alone a lot faster.

And John was honestly amazed the madwoman hadn’t hurt the blonde. She was definitely the jealous type, bloodthirsty and insane, so her leaving Felicity unscathed when she was the competition didn’t make sense. Especially less than a day after she’d nearly broken Tommy Merlyn’s hand just to make Oliver understand that she was willing to hurt people he cared about to get what she wanted.

But Felicity was shaking her head. “They didn’t see either of you entering the garage because you all came in through the east entrance—I’ve been keeping maintenance from fixing that.”

John didn’t know about that, but thinking about it, it did make sense. That camera should’ve been fixed months ago, the guardrail only kept cars out unless someone in the car had a Q.C I.D badge or was among the far few people with the passcode to circumvent it. But it wasn’t a sealed door; if they wanted to anyone could walk around it if they didn’t have a card to scan or the code. At the very least their should be a security guard stationed there while the camera was down. There again though, that camera had been down for months—it was probably how Walter Steele was removed from the parking garage without anyone seeing, though Felicity said that most of the security cameras were offline anyway for maintenance. It was a little reassuring to know that the I.T expert was the reason it hadn’t been repaired yet, so he only listened as she kept going matter-of-factly.

“Besides, I’d told them that I was upgrading the systems, so there might be some blackouts, lag-time—stuff like that,” the computer genius hesitated a moment, then admitted. “And I set the cameras in the I.T Department to lag behind anyway.”

The bodyguard blinked at her. “What?”

“I’ve set it to be about twenty minutes behind real-time.” Felicity told him calmly.

“Why?” John asked her.

“Because you never know who’s going to walk into the I.T Department with something any sensible person should find suspicious,” the pointed out, very dryly.

The bodyguard got exactly what she was referring to, of course, but he still had to shake his head exasperatedly. “Felicity, they could’ve helped you.”
“How?” The genius actually rolled her eyes. “Remember that cat I told you about? When you brought Oliver in while he was half-dead from weaponized-Vertigo so I could run what was left behind and back-trace it to the water source?”

Her at the time amusing admission came back to him easily. “Well, once a cat did get in, but a guard tazed it. It smelled like fur and static in here for like a week.”

“Yeah,” John admitted, not seeing what that had to do with this.

“It took three guards almost an hour to catch that one poor cat,” the blonde explained exasperatedly, shaking her head. “And they nearly hit people while they were at it. Four times. Well, three, really. I think the one that almost hit Stevenson twice might’ve been aiming for him, because he’d been yelling at them for about twenty minutes by then—but he missed both times anyway.” She raised an eyebrow in response to his disbelieving blink. “If they couldn’t handle a stray cat, do you really think they would’ve stood any chance against the Huntress? Never mind that tazers against a crossbow aren’t exactly great odds to begin with?”

John pressed his lips together for a moment, and then said. “They would’ve called the cops,” he told her, because it was probably Q.C Security’s S.O.P anyway. And if it wasn’t, it definitely should be.

“Even better,” Felicity snorted. “Then Oliver would’ve had to change out of his leathers before he could rush into the building—and have to explain when he interrupted the detectives wanting to know what the Huntress wanted with me how he even knew about all of it so quickly.” She shook her head. “And his cover-stories? Aren’t very good.”

The bodyguard couldn’t deny that, but kept trying anyway. “He could’ve said someone in the building called him. Or you could’ve said you called him.”

“It’d still be weak,” Felicity refuted. “And it would still leave questions with answers that weren’t going to completely satisfy anybody.”

“You’re right,” John admitted with a sigh. He hesitated a moment, then decided it had to be said. “But Felicity, she could’ve killed you tonight.”

“I know,” the blonde answered evenly, and far too calmly.
The former soldier stared at her for several long, searching seconds. “No, you don’t,” John frowned. “She’s used that crossbow of hers to kill half a dozen people already. And before that she was using guns. One bolt could’ve killed you as easily as any bullet.”

“I know,” the blonde said again, elaborating this time. “But the secret would’ve still been safe then. Oliver—”

“Would never forgive himself,” the former soldier cut her off. “I wouldn’t have forgiven myself. Felicity, neither one of us would’ve agreed to you joining the team if we thought it’d put you in danger. We said we’d keep you safe.”

The blonde looked at him a moment, then sighed. “That’s sweet, and I appreciate that you both care,” she told him, before she shook her head. “But I chose to sign on. And I chose to help both of you to the best of my ability—that includes covering the trails that you two are so helpless at even noticing. And if that means—”

“He’ll never agree to you dying for his secret, Felicity,” John cut her off firmly. “And neither will I.”

She really rolled her eyes again. “I’m not planning on it, but that doesn’t mean I’m letting either of you make my choices for me.”

John sighed, “That’s not—”

“That’s exactly what this is about.” Felicity cut him off, voice even firmer than before. Carrying with it the kind of authority he’d long associated with much higher ranking officers in the military, not with sweet, funny I.T girls. Though she was the only one he knew. “We each make our own choices, John. Our choices can and will influence each other, but none of us can take decisions away from others without their consent.”

He was so surprised by her use of his given name, let alone everything else she said, that for a moment he could only blink at her.

The sound of a motorcycle engine coming closer, and then clearly coming to a stop right outside before it was turned off made both of them look towards the front. Though they couldn’t see wherever their missing teammate had parked since the shades were fully drawn. Drawing them shut was the first thing she’d done after that brief frown and sigh at her broken door while he’d
made sure the rest of the house was secure.

John stood up again as his friend did, watching her hesitate before she looked at him.

“Mind letting him in?” she asked, almost keeping herself from wincing as she made that request. “I should probably turn in.”

She really should, and the bodyguard didn’t want to be here for the argument that might result if any of what he’d already talked to her about came out now. Between the Bertinelli bitch, the broken door, and whether or not she should ever be in danger, they could be arguing well past dawn.

“Sure,” John nodded, offering her a small smile and a nod. “Get some sleep, you hear?”

“I’ll try,” she agreed with a sigh, heading back for her bedroom even as he headed towards the front door.

John waited until she’d closed the bedroom door behind her before he even made the last few steps towards the front door. Sparing a quick glance through the eyehole to be sure the right man was on the other side of the door, but still keeping one hand on the butt of his gun as he opened it, letting it go only once he could see for sure that it was his friend and employer standing there and that he was alone. He stepped aside and held the door open without saying anything, mainly because the unhappy expression on the Vigilante’s face said more than enough—and it wasn’t like the other man was stupid enough to come back here and in the front door without first changing out of his costume.

“No sign of her,” Oliver admitted with a sigh as his bodyguard closed the door, his frown firmly in place as he looked around. It deepened a little as he glanced towards Felicity’s closed bedroom door and notice the light was still on in there. “She hasn’t gone to sleep yet?”

“You really expect her not to wait up?” John raised an eyebrow at him.

The billionaire sighed, shaking his head. “No.” His glance around the room paused on the repaired kitchen door with a blink, then he winced as he looked at the other closed door he could see.

“She might’ve worried less if you’d kept in contact while you were out,” the bodyguard pointed
out mildly, raising both hands in immediate surrender when the other man scowled at him. “She might be less upset with you then, too, but…” he affected a ‘but what do I know?’ shrug and then indicated his handiwork. “Didn’t say much about that either, but she wasn’t interested in another movie tonight.”

After a few seconds of silence, with both of them listening to their third teammate’s near-silent movements as she finished getting ready for bed, the archer finally sighed again.

A resigned sigh showed how uninterested the vigilante was in having this argument out right now. “One of the windows was busted in at the fake house she sent Helena to, and she burned some rubber off her bike on the street outside, but those were the only signs that she’d been there.” Oliver shook his head. “No idea where she’d go now… but we’re gonna have to stick close to Felicity for a while.”

“You're psycho ex does have a vengeful streak, and now she has two reasons to hurt Felicity.” John nodded, easily seeing the logic there. He was the professional bodyguard, after all. And he’d remind the other man of that as many times as it took for him to keep in mind that the former mob princess was the dragon here, not the damsel in distress.

Oliver winced, but actually didn’t bother even trying to defend the Huntress. Knowing his friend was right. “I'll be crashing on the couch—”

“Obviously,” John snorted, but other than shooting him a quick look the younger man ignored his interjection.

“You can head out now,” Oliver finished, nodding towards the door. “See you in the morning.”

“Seven sharp.” John acknowledged, turning towards the door but stopping when the other man corrected him.

“Seven forty-five's fine,” Oliver shrugged when the bodyguard raised an eyebrow at him. “Q.C's only twenty minutes away, and she doesn't have to be at work till nine anyway. Normally or for her meeting with my mother.”

“She wanted to finish something before that meeting,” John reminded him. “So she's gonna want to be in before nine o'clock.”
Oliver's wince was at least half a scowl. “She needs to sleep. It’s almost three.”

“I don’t have any knockout gas handy,” the bodyguard replied dryly. “And since you two aren’t sleeping together yet, that’d be about your only option for keeping her in bed tomorrow morning.” He frowned when it looked like the other man might actually be considering it. “If you want her to break up with you and stop helping in general, right after she comes to, that is.”

The vigilante eye-roll looked weird with the half scowl, too. “I’m not gonna knock her out, Digg.” He shook his head. “Believe it or not I do have some common sense.”

“Good to know. Be nice to see it some time,” Digg nodded as he turned towards the door, adding in compromise. “I’ll be here for seven-fifteen, then.”

“See you then,” the billionaire reluctantly agreed as he followed him to the front door. “Enjoy your four hours of sleep.”

“You, too,” John chuckled as the door shut behind him, the impressive array of locks there each turning into place as he walked down the steps towards the second car in the driveway.

He almost wanted to wish the other man luck with the next morning, but honestly the vigilante deserved whatever grudge his entirely too forgiving girlfriend was capable of clinging to. He didn’t really want to know if the genius was her perky self even before a cup of coffee in the morning—or however the hell many she had to drink throughout the day.

And he was only mildly curious as to whether or not Oliver Queen would have the common sense to play dead on the couch at least until after she’d started drinking that first cup... since he couldn't quite see the billionaire getting the bright idea of making it for her as a peace offering. After all, even if the man hadn't grown up with servants handling that sort of thing around his home until a sinking ship had taken him away from coffee makers along with everything else: bringing her a cup of coffee, if he did think about it, might stray too close to a too early wake-up call in the man's mind.

Then again, the still rather new couple had defied almost all of his expectations of them. That they’d even managed to make it work this much so far he credited almost entirely to Felicity. But some credit was due to Oliver, too, since the man had made the effort to move on from the castaway that’d reminded him of more than a few of his fellow soldiers after their first firefight when he’d first gotten back.
Hopefully—John thought as he got into the car, put the key into the ignition and turned it, then backed out and drove away—however it was that they'd managed to work so well together so far would continue to last. Because the way watching Oliver threw himself into those absolutely brutal exercises for hours on end was exhausting just to watch. He already knew from watching after the archer's short relationship with his psychotic ex—and anytime anything happened with the sainted Laurel Lance—that the other man could actually get worse. Much worse.

Worse than that? John was absolutely sure he did not want to see how hurt Felicity would undoubtedly be post-breaking up with Oliver. Whether she continued working with them or not, she would be hurt, and as he'd somehow found himself starting to think of her as the little sister he'd never known he'd wanted a while back that wasn't at all something he wanted to see.

Right now, though, he had to drive the rest of the way home, climb up the six flights of stairs to his apartment, set his alarm clock and get in bed. Dawn was only a few hours off even though it was still late winter, and he’d be back or on his way before the sun came up anyway. Not well rested, of course, but he’d had to make do with less sleep before. And if their computer genius was able to get up and keep soldiering on he certainly wasn’t going to let her down.

Lyla used to say that our loved ones were the one that made us better, because they gave us something worth fight for. Even though he’d signed the divorce papers when she’d asked him to, John could still say he completely agreed with her. So he’d be there for his friends and his family every step of the way for as long as he could take them.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there’s another update!
To those of you that think this story is too drawn out, I do apologize. I kind of agree with you about some parts being a bit long, and maybe I’ll end up dropping them once I get to revising the whole story at once. But that’s still some ways off, so hopefully the good parts keep outweighing the bad until then.
To everyone else, I’m glad you’re still enjoying the story!
The next scene shouldn’t take too long, as it’s already written and just in need of revising. And I think I have a few weeks where nothing is happening outside of work, too. Always helpful for writing, and especially editing.
I’d love to hear more about what everyone thinks about what’s happened, what might happen, and anything else you noticed so far. (That included errors that require editing—each one means something I won’t have to fix later. So thanks in advance!)
Anyway, comments are always appreciated. :-D
Bye for now!
~ Jess S
Once, Oliver woke up gradually. Nothing could be wrong with the world back then. But then *The Gambit* was swallowed by the sea and an island that could've been called Hell instead of Purgatory taught him differently. Before all that, his ears would eventually tune into the world around him even as he kept his eyelids firmly shut, until he finally started to blink awake as his brain really started registering the quiet sounds of the morning.

His internal clock had never failed him unless a heck of a lot of alcohol was involved the night before, and he didn't tend to party *that* hard on nights he knew he had to get up early the next day, so wake-up alarms had never been a necessity to him. In fact, it was those same morning alarms in his first—and last—frat house that'd had him renting nearby apartments at the schools after that. He'd never understand how those piercing, aggravating sounds were something anyone could ever want to wake up to.

After his father's boat had sunk in a storm and he'd had to watch his father kill himself, of course, he'd washed up on the shores of Lian Yu. On that Island, of course, restful sleep had been a luxury he typically couldn't afford, and he knew it. Usually when Oliver woke up in the mornings there, *if* he even got the chance to sleep, his hearing was already tuned into his surroundings, mainly from countless times of being in situations where people couldn't know he was conscious and aware. But also because a part of him that kept listening while he slept. For survival's sake.

At first, in the short days before he realized he wasn't, in fact, alone in the middle of nowhere—but trapped on an island with who knows how many murderers running around—he hadn't slept well because it didn't matter if he tried closing his eyes on the cold hard ground or huddling in a treetop; it was *not* comfortable. And absolute comfort had been a staple of his life up right till then. So instead of closing his eyes and dozing off into peaceful rest, he'd shift and flinch away from every rock or bark that dug into his back for hours, sometimes shuddering against the cold—but thankfully never freezing—night air.

*Then,* he learned he wasn't alone—learned terror, and agony, and everything else. And he'd learned sleeping at all was a very necessary luxury to seize whenever you could. The easiest nights there had been when Shado and Slade were both with him, after they'd finally taken down Fyers and it seemed like the Island was somewhat safe, even though they were still stuck there. By then, he'd come to trust Slade; thought of him as a brother even more than Tommy had been to him growing up—the big brother he'd never particularly wanted, but so desperately needed in those early days on the Island. And Shado was a boon unto herself; so caring and kind... had Ivo been threatening
other than Sara in his sickening trade, Oliver wouldn't have hesitated to protect Shado that night instead, but his guilty conscious couldn't stand the thought of seeing Sara die yet again because of him. Not that that'd turned out any better the second time around.

But losing Sara, and Shado and Slade, hadn't been the last horror of the Island—as he thought've all those five years of his life, the ones away from Lian Yu, too—had had in store for him. It didn’t matter that not every day from after he’d washed up there till his pre-arranged rescue was spent on that cursed place. If anything, his time away and his eventual returns meant that once he really was finally free and willing to try return home his mind was irrevocably changed from those five years.

A crucible, as Helena had said. Melting him down to make him into the man he was today, no matter how much he'd fought it along the way or how many times he felt he should've just been dumped into the fire.

On and on it all went, until rest wasn't really something Oliver knew. He'd lay down to sleep wherever he could, close his eyes and listen until he was sure it was safe, and then his ears would keep listening. His eyes would snap open at the slightest change in his environment; and though it’d sometimes feel like he'd only just gone to sleep—and sometimes he had—he learned to be alert as soon as he woke from natural sleep. It'd saved his life more than once.

Coming back to... everything, his home, his family, himself, he'd tried to trust everything enough to really sleep. And had ended up attacking his mother when she woke him from a nightmare as a result.

Thus he'd let his Island training take over again, accepting the luxury of a real bed only sometimes, more often just preferring the soft carpet on the floor to the too soft, cloud-like feeling of a mattress, but he didn't let his guard down anymore by choice.

Or he didn't.

Until that first night he'd fallen asleep on Felicity's couch with the small blonde nestled in his arms... It’d been different. Oliver couldn't have said if it was the fact that no one could know to look for him there, or that it was just different enough from the roughness of the Island, or that it was also just similar enough to falling asleep with Shado tucked against him, or if it was really just Felicity... but those times he'd fallen asleep on her couch he'd woken up more rested than he'd felt in a very long time. Rested and peaceful, even before he opened his eyes to confirm the bundle of warmth burrowing into him was his favorite blonde.

So it was quite a change, waking up to the sound of her shower starting.
He had slept well, again, in the few short hours he’d been asleep. Maybe he should buy a replica of her couch, because even without her in his arms he’d fallen asleep without much trouble. Yes, he’d been more on edge—alert for any sign that might indicate Helena had made the mistake of coming to Felicity’s home—but that hadn’t happened and he still felt more rested after that four-hour nap then he did after almost every night back at the mansion. Oh, he’d woken up to check on Felicity twice, when the slightest noises triggered his inner alarms and made him need to know she was alright. Had she been in his arms, maybe he wouldn't have woken up at all, but he couldn't say he minded. He would've preferred joining her in her bed, or sleeping on the floor beside it—he'd known better than to push it when she hadn’t even waited to say goodnight after she was sure he’d arrived last night. When Digg had obviously waited for her bedroom door to close before he'd let the vigilante inside.

But waking up to the realization that Felicity had somehow gotten out of bed and into the shower—even if she hadn’t had to leave her bedroom to do it—was a surprise. He should have woken when she first got up: from the slight squeak of her bed’s springs, or the light steps of her feet on the soft carpet she had on that floor. That she’d been able to get all the way to the bathroom, to start the shower without him waking up until that distinct sound of water in the pipes hummed through the walls, was... shocking.

Felicity's townhouse was too close to the Glades for his liking. It was even before he learned she went running around her neighborhood, sometimes even late into the night. So her not being safely settled in his arms, either here on the couch or in her bed should have had him waking up at anything and everything he heard. Like it had more than once last night, especially with the very real possibility that Helena might pay her another visit.

It was a relief that the Huntress had apparently decided to leave without going after Felicity again. If she’d found her at Q.C, it was very likely that she could find her home but Oliver couldn't help but be glad that no attempted reprisal was forthcoming. Though it might be a few days, or even weeks, before he could be mostly sure of that. He’d fight her if he had to, but a part of him still hoped she could be saved from herself; because if she couldn't be, what hope did he have?

Still, the point remained as he got up and made his way to the kitchen, that he probably should have woken up many more times last night. And he definitely should have woken up when she got up from her bed, or when she closed the bathroom door that had a noticeable 'creak' to it. Sure, she hadn’t come out of her bedroom, and she wasn’t in that bathroom that was only a few feet away from the couch he'd been sleeping on.

But still... he should’ve woken up.

Only he hadn't.
He hadn't consciously decided not to, either. Hadn't heard her trying to sneak around and let her believe she'd managed it.

She had absolutely managed it. And it was surprising; the thought that Felicity Smoak—his brilliant, beautiful, often babbling Felicity—could actually be quiet enough to sneak by him.

But she was a skilled swordswoman, too. A skill set she still hadn't completely admitted to, let alone explained, and one that lent credence to the idea that she may be able to move more softly than even his ears could hear. After all, apparently she had.

Oliver checked that the coffee maker was set to go before starting it, even though he knew that prepping it for the next day was part of Felicity's typical morning routine. He was relieved to confirm that she hadn't skipped yesterday morning, because she made a particularly good cup of coffee; something that you wouldn't think was hard—the coffee beans go in the grinder, the water goes in the reservoir and you press 'start'—but a good cup of coffee wasn't the same thing. Something you could only notice when you tried tasting your own coffee after your last cup had been made by someone who knew what they were doing. And Felicity knew what she was doing—Oliver had only been to a few restaurants since his return to Starling City, but he was still sure that he couldn't remember a cup of coffee tasting better than the what Felicity brewed; and it was amazing every time he'd tried it. Hopefully his turning the machine on wouldn't mess it up...

As the grinder stopped whirring—its job done, the heady scent on the air assured him—the sound of the shower going reminded him he had a time limit here if he wanted to have breakfast ready before she finished. And he didn't need to look at the nearby door—repaired by their friend but not so that it looked good as new—to know that he really wanted a peace offering on hand when Felicity came out this morning. So Oliver headed for the fridge.

His cooking skills hadn't been anything to write home about even before the Island, of course. Not when Raisa was usually the one cooking at home. But the motherly Russian immigrant had managed to impart some of her know-how to both Queen children growing up, so he'd known some things before he'd gone off to his first college. Learning how to kill small animals and make them edible had been a necessity on the island, though his cooking skills there could've never won any awards. All of Felicity's modern appliances and fully-stocked fridge, though, should obviously make it easier than it'd ever been on Lian Yu. Breakfast was always his favorite meal to cook anyway; somehow the staples he was used to then just seemed easier than trying to cook a dinner, or even sometimes lunch.

Scrambling eggs wasn't exactly hard, though he'd had to figure out for himself when they were done back in college when he no longer had Raisa there to let him know. That'd resulted in more than a few rubbery meals as he'd wanted to be sure they were completely cooked through and over
done it. At some point he'd have to try making them some other ways, but when he was hoping to surprise Felicity with a nice breakfast wasn't the time to experiment. Adding to that the slices of bread he put in the toaster, also left on its owner's setting, some sausage that you just stuck in the microwave and some sliced fruit—and he actually ended up with a presentable breakfast by the time he was done.

“That smells good,” Felicity's soft voice didn't surprise him because he'd heard the shower turn off just as he was finishing up, and the door open a few minutes later, but the sight of her when he turned around did still make him blink, pausing for the brief blink as he finished plating the eggs.

Her dress's bright color wasn't what one would normally expect in the business world, but the style went with the asymmetrical jacket that was neatly held shut by a modest belt. The two didn't match as a typical suit set, but the pop of contrasting colors fit Felicity just as well as the reserved but nonetheless flattering cut of the entire outfit did. It wasn't something his mother would ever wear, but Oliver didn't think she'd disapprove of the pink dress that wasn't unappealing or revealing.

And that was when Oliver's brain made the connection. His mother—whom Felicity was meeting. This morning. At Q.C. *That* was why she was up so early: much too early, considering how little she’d slept lately, and how late they'd both been awake last night.

“You'll want to get that before it burns,” his girlfriend told him, gesturing towards the toaster where his own toast was still toasting with the butter knife she'd started buttering the toast on her plate. “It always over does it, after the first set of toast,” she added with a small yawn. “I could fix it, but I've been busy lately.”

Oliver quickly rescued his toast, tossing it towards his plate with one hand even as he grabbed the now full coffee pot with the other. “You look nice,” he found his tongue as he filled the two mugs he'd set out earlier.

“Thank you,” Felicity answered brightly, no sign of upset seemed to be there in her voice or her face, from either the aftershock of fear or any of her at times unreasonable irritation at his wanting to keep her safe. She was smiling brightly like he'd spent last night just because. Like he hadn’t slept on the couch last night, alone for the first time. Though they hadn't slept in her bed together or had sex yet: already having set a record for himself that he found made him strangely proud of himself. It felt right not to rush, to wait for when it would be right, and he appreciated though it made almost every relationship he'd had before seem rushed. The exceptions, of course were Shado and Laurel. With Shado, though, he'd been trying to make himself remember Laurel for the first time in his life. And the fact that it'd taken him and Laurel so long to sleep with each for the first time probably had more to do with the facts that they'd started dating in high school and his mom had kept almost as sharp an eye on them as her father. Still, it didn't seem wrong to associate Felicity with either of those women who had been very special to him...
Oliver quickly shook the thoughts off, buttering his own toast while he watched her add half-and-half to both their mugs and sugar to hers, taking an appreciative sip from his as soon as she was done. “You gotta tell me how you do this,” he told her, seizing onto the lighter topic that he actually wouldn't mind an answer to—or at least a how-to lesson in. Especially if the origin of her coffee was in there. She stored it in a pretty canister on her counter, so there was no brand name there.

Felicity chuckled as she slid into the farther stool on the opposite side of the counter while he followed her around to claim the closer one. “We all have to have some secrets, Oliver,” she replied, her tone so clearly teasing that he couldn't help but smile. “It's what keeps life interesting.”

The implication wasn't lost on him. Not when he'd only just been thinking if her unexplained skill with swords had something to do with how she was able to sneak around near him, asleep or not.

“So you're meeting with my mom today,” Oliver decided to tame that particular elephant in the room, because it was probably the safest of the herd. He could hope. “About your work at Q.C.”

“Yup,” Felicity agreed unhelpfully, before taking another sip of her coffee and focusing on eating her breakfast again. Eating neatly and quietly. Watching her reminded him of the etiquette lessons he'd had to endure under maternal orders as a child, lessons that he hadn't forgotten but nearly had to re-teach himself since his return to the civilized world, because the Bratva had only expected a little more in the way of table manners than ARGUS.

Oliver watched her for several seconds, waiting for her to say something else even though he knew she preferred quiet until she'd 'at least finished her first cup of coffee,' despite the morning person she definitely was. Finally he noted how quickly she was eating, despite the proper neatness of each bite, and glanced at the clock before commenting. “You know, you have over two hours before you have to be there.”

“Actually, I should call a cab now.” She shook her head as she set her fork down and reached for the phone with that hand instead of the one holding her coffee cup. A priority he could well understand even if she had been getting enough sleep lately. “My car's still back in the garage back at Q.C.”

Oliver stopped her before she could snatch her cell phone out of the charging station his had joined it in last night. “Digg'll be here soon. We'll drop you off.”
Felicity shook her head. “I need to be there before the meeting, a cab—”

“Then I'll text Digg to get over here A-SAP,” he interrupted again, reaching for his phone to do just that. Deliberately keeping his hand in between hers and her own phone as he did so.

**Be there in 20,** was Digg’s not unexpected response. He knew the former solider kept hours almost as early as his, regardless of the late nights they frequently kept. And his bodyguard *had* warned him to expect this.

“He'll be on his way soon,” Oliver reported, jerking his chin towards the nearby clock as he took another sip of coffee. “It's not even seven yet, Felicity. Q.C’s twenty minutes away; half-an-hour, at most.”

“I need to finish some of the stuff I was working on before the meeting,” the tech girl insisted stubbornly, focused on her plate again; probably to avoid seeing the frown he sent her way.

“That's what my mom's meeting you about.” Oliver frowned at her.

“No,” Felicity shook her head immediately, arching an unimpressed eyebrow as she met his gaze. “She's meeting with me because you introduced me as your girlfriend,” She took another sip of her coffee and then shrugged. “The job stuff's just an excuse.”

Oliver rolled his eyes, “Believe it or not, my mom does care about the company—and the people that make up Q.C.”

That brought her bright blue eyes back to his, a frown underneath hers. “I know she does,” Felicity shook her head. “I know... But, Oliver, she never would've met me if I wasn't your date to the club opening.”

Oliver nodded, but he was still frowning. “I'm confused... Are you nervous about meeting my mother again?”

Felicity snorted, rolling her eyes as she finished off the last piece of sausage on her plate, chewing and swallowing—manners perfect—before she replied. “Of course I'm nervous, Oliver. She's your *mother*. And I know she's probably not gonna pull a gun on me, but—”
“She already likes you,” Oliver interrupted again, ignoring the reference to exactly how she'd ended up finding out he was the man under the hood. And hoping this wasn’t going to lead to her remembering any understandable upset at his abandoning her with his mother and sister shortly after he’d introduced them.

“She likes my P.h.D, you mean,” Felicity corrected, standing to take her empty plate and cup to the sink before coming back for his plate.

Leaving his mug be since it was still in his hand. He wasn't giving up a single drop of her coffee, because it really was that good.

“And she probably likes that I got you to smile and laugh a few times, but she doesn't really know me.”

Oliver raised an eyebrow at that, “So, what? All this,” he waived to her bright but professional ensemble, “Is your second first impression or something?”

“Something like that, I guess,” Felicity agreed with a small smile as she started pouring herself a second cup of coffee, obligingly refilling his cup when it was presented to her. “How long's Digg going to be?” she asked it mildly, as if the answer didn't particularly matter, but it still made him frown.

“'Bout fifteen minutes,” Oliver answered after another glance at the clock, shaking his head. “Felicity, you can't possibly be expected to be in there before even eight in the morning. Especially not when you leave so late—”

“Last night wasn't the norm,” she tried to insist, and he shook his head again.

“You were there after nine the night I went to scare my mom,” Oliver reminded her, shaking his head as he remembered second of instant relief he’d felt when he saw her stepping out of the elevator down in the parking garage and realized the car he'd stopped to take a breath at was hers, too. Sneaking into the backseat after she'd triggered all the doors to unlock hadn't been hard, not wanting to scare her was much harder. “I couldn't believe my luck when I saw you headed out. And I checked the Q.C time logs afterwards. You were in before nine that morning.”

He mentioned those logs to show her that he knew exactly what hours she was keeping. Though
she was on salary for the position—or positions, plural?—that Walter had promoted her to, the I.T Department was almost entirely hour-by-hour, plus the quarterly bonuses based mostly on how many jobs they completed each month. No one else was even close, not in the entire department. Felicity Smoak put in more overtime last year than any other tech there, by far. Though he suspected her supervisor didn't sign off on half the number of projects she probably completed. If he had to guess, he'd say the genius was carrying the majority of the workload for the whole department on her shoulders, and there was more than a little wrong with that.

Outside of making him try to find Stevenson's name on The List weeks ago—he hadn't, damn it—it also made Oliver wonder about all the friends she supposedly had. The friends that kept in touch by phone or over the Internet because none of them lived nearby. Not one. Even though she'd moved here when Q.C hired her straight out of M.I.T over three years ago. Friends who wouldn't wonder why she was working longer hours not because she'd already been working long hours even before she joined the team completely, but because she would've been working anyway. He'd thought she'd stayed late at Q.C to help him with the armored cars heists and tracking down the Vertigo, but would she be at work every night if she didn't know he was expecting her to be at the club outside of most normal business hours? The thought that helping him with the List was the closest thing she had to close friends didn't seem right at all, whether he wanted to keep her all to himself or not.

So Oliver was relieved that his stepfather had noticed Felicity before his disappearance—it was yet another thing that made him hope the man was still alive out there somewhere though months down the line it didn't seem likely. His mother hadn't said what she had planned regarding Felicity's future at Q.C, but the genius wouldn't be able to argue with the C.E.O of Queen Consolidated about working too many hours, and hopefully she wouldn't want to. Oliver didn't doubt Felicity could hold her own against his mother if she had to, but Moira Queen was almost impossible to argue with when she was wrong, let alone when she was right. And his mother wanted him to be happy so she'd look after Felicity now. Whatever the plans Walter Steele might've left behind for them to follow.

It might make Oliver feel guiltier, leaving the burden of the family company to his mother, if he couldn't also see that it was good for her. And that she'd desperately needed something to do in the wake of Walter's abduction. She'd been lonely when he'd gone away, but with him actually completely gone—maybe not dead, but still gone—she was lost. Running Q.C was helping her, and Oliver had to take comfort in that.

That didn't mean he'd keep quiet about Felicity's insane hours. It didn't matter to him that she barely seemed the worse for wear after weeks and weeks of constant overtime—on top of everything she'd done for him in the same timeframe; an ever-increasing chore she never complained about either. Even the strongest person under enough strain would break eventually; and Oliver did not want to see the woman he was already more than half in love with shatter. Or come even close to it.

Felicity sighed, “There've been many cyber threats these last few years. The government calls it
cyber warfare, but it's not just between countries, Oliver. It's not only politics,” she shook her head. “It's economics. And economics is businesses.”

“Like *Queen Consolidated,*” Oliver nodded, easily able to follow that line of thought, despite how out-of-date he still kind of felt with modern technology. He'd never been especially obsessed with the latest tech as a boy; his family had often had the prototypes to play with before anyone else could them from the commercials, and in the rare times they didn't, all either Queen child had to do was indicate even the slightest interest to their to their parents or any of the servants and it'd soon be theirs. But not paying close attention to that market before meant he was out of sync even before the island, regardless of the unhelpful time he'd spent with ARGUS or the Bratva later on.

“Yeah,” his girlfriend nodded again. “And Q.C doesn't have cyber security specialists—it just has a handful of techs who know what they're doing outside of the box.”

“A few techs?” Oliver accused gently, frowning. “Or just you?”

“Mostly me,” Felicity admitted without any hesitation. “Most real cyber security specialists do consultations more than salaries; the real good ones, anyway,” She nodded confirmation before he could prod. “Yes, like me.” Then she sighed, “There's so much happening so quickly in the world today, Oliver. You must've noticed the difference—"

“Since I came back? Yeah, I have,” Oliver nodded, then shrugged. “But that's what technology does, isn't it?”

The tech genius snorted. “Technology advances, yes. But people go right along with it—and until big business adapts, too, hacks and leaks are going to be as regular a part of the daily news as the weather,” she shook her head. “I'm just trying to make sure Q.C isn't one of them—at least not while I'm working there.”

“We appreciate that,” Oliver smirked, amused by her professional pride, but also understanding it.

He wouldn't have, before the Island, but even before he'd returned to save this city like his father had requested, he'd learned the pride of knowing he'd accomplished something—and the ache of knowing someone else had soundly beaten him more than a few times, too. It wasn't exactly the same thing: comparing Slade beating him into the dirt to another hacker maybe managing to beat Felicity's computer programs, but it was probably close enough. Enough so that these days he could usually tell the difference between pride and arrogance... usually.
He knew Felicity wasn't arrogant; half the time she didn't even seem that *proud* of herself. Like her skill with computers—even her skill with a sword, actually—were to be expected, just as much as his skill with a bow was. Like her computer science abilities hadn't taken her a whole lifetime to develop, and her swordsmanship probably had, too...

“Still,” the blonde spoke up again after a moment of quiet. “I'm not sure how I should tell your mother that.”

“Don't think of her as my mom,” Oliver suggested. “Think of her as—”

“My boss's boss?” Felicity shook her head. “Believe it or not, that wouldn't help even if I could temporarily forget that she's your mother, too.”

He shook his head. “You worked well with Walter, didn't you?”

“Your mom's more intimidating than Walter ever was,” she insisted, thinking about it a second before adding. “Maybe because she's your mom.”

Oliver had to laugh at that, “Relax, Felicity. She really does like you.”

“That's always nice to hear,” she replied almost flippantly as she stood up, snatching his empty plate along with her own and heading for the sink with them.

“Felicity, she *does,*” Oliver insisted more firmly, frowning at the thought that she didn't believe him on something that was both so simple and, on a more personal level, important.

The blonde sighed as she finished rinsing the plates, setting one on the counter before snagging the nearby dishtowel to towel dry the other plate as she turned to him. “I know,” she reassured him with a shrug, putting the first plate down to reach for the other. “But it's not that simple, Oliver. Your mom has every right to worry about you, you know. She would even if you hadn't basically come back from the dead a few months ago.”

“I know,” he nodded seriously, then sighed. “But what does that have to do with her liking you or not?”
The blonde rolled her eyes before turning away, hanging the dishtowel up before grabbing the first clean plate to return the pair to their cupboard, then going back for the other. Putting away one plate, and then the other, one at a time, which seemed odd. The plates weren't delicate china, so not economizing the movements into one move wasn't like Felicity, but then she was answering him.

“It doesn't, and it does.” She said, only turning back to him after she'd put the cleaned silverware away, too. “Family can be complicated, Oliver. Very complicated. But that doesn't make it any less precious.”

“...I know,” Oliver nodded again, eyes narrowed as he tried to read the genius, wondering if there'd ever be a time that she'd make complete sense to him without a lot of thought first. Hoping that it would: that if he knew her long enough and he was smart enough, he might really be worthy of her.

He'd never really believed it could happen with Laurel, because she was always so much better than him. Felicity was, too, but somehow she accepted him anyway. Somehow she wasn't constantly disappointed in him, like Laurel almost always was, the longer they'd dated.

Oliver watched her for several more short minutes, while she went through the practiced motions of cleaning up her kitchen. Including cleaning the coffee maker and prepping it for the next day: after she poured them each a to-go cup, of course. He couldn't make himself ask about the coffee now, not when he was watching her so close to the door he'd broken the night before.

It was something he hadn't thought about at all. Hadn't hesitated to break a piece of her property when he thought she was in danger. And she had been, but she wasn't here, so he'd broken into her home for nothing. That mistake—and the mistake of underestimating Helena at all—could have cost him Felicity. So he deserved any angry words she could throw at him and every disappointed look.

But she wasn't talking about last night. Wasn't looking at the door; he hadn't seen her spare it a second's thought as far as he could tell.

Why?

How?

“I just want to make a good impression,” Felicity insisted firmly as she set his next coffee in front of him. Then she walked around the counter again, heels clicking as she headed for the front door.
with him following quickly behind her.

Oliver grabbed her coat before she could, helping her put it on before carefully catching hold of her shoulders to turn her to face him again, gentling his hold more automatically when he saw her slight wince. He took hold of her chin to make her meet his eyes then. “She'll love you, Felicity, don't doubt that.”

It was something he could say with absolute certainty. No matter how protective his mother might be of him now that he'd—as Felicity said—basically come back from the dead. Felicity had made him smile and laugh: she made his whole world a little brighter effortlessly. And that, he knew, was something his mother was happy—*thrilled*—to see. So was Thea.

After all, both Queen women had commented on it... before all the craziness of the night had taken place. They hadn't made the connection, at that time, to Felicity, but he'd seen it in the glances they kept shooting the blonde during *Verdant's* opening. It'd been the reason behind his mother's questions about Felicity yesterday morning, too. And Thea's texts about wanting to meet her again and could she have her phone-number had been all the more blatant.

Felicity locked eyes with him for a moment that felt very long—and for that very long moment her eyes looked very old—and then she turned her head away to escape his grasp with a nod. “Thank you,” She gave him a once-over then, before raising an eyebrow. “Aren't you going to change?”

Oliver shook his head and rolled his shoulders in a shrug. “Didn't bring anything else to change into.”

It wasn't like he could wear the hood and green leather out in broad daylight. And while the clothes he was wearing now really were too informal for showing up at *Queen Consolidated*, whether it was his family's company or not, it wasn't like she'd let him follow her up to the *I.T Department* and his mother wouldn't welcoming him showing up before their meeting either.

Felicity rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything as she looked towards the door again, clearly impatient to be on her way, so Oliver grabbed his coat, too, and threw it on.

It wasn't even a whole minute later that his phone was vibrating, and when Oliver grabbed it off the counter the message there was the one they were expecting. “Digg's here.”

“Great,” his girlfriend nodded, grabbing her purse as she hurried towards the door.
Oliver sighed softly as he followed her out, waiting patiently while she locked her front door before trailing her to the town car, keeping just a little more distance than he'd like as his eyes kept scanning for any sign of Helena—or any kind of threat—despite knowing that Digg would've already done so, and was still be doing, the same thing as he opened the door for them.

He was paying so much attention to their surroundings that Oliver almost didn't notice the frown that Felicity gave the backseat before getting into it—he probably wouldn't have if she hadn't smiled through her 'good morning' to Digg. But he did notice. So he couldn't help frowning himself as he watched her get gingerly into the car and carefully slide across the backseat—like she was afraid of hurting herself by accident, wary of an injury that she knew couldn't take much; but she didn't wince like she was in actual pain.

Had Helena bothered her a few days ago, he might take it for a sign that Felicity had mild bruises on the mend or something of that sort, but any real injury from last night—even if she'd hidden them under her coat, then pajamas last night and her professional attire this morning—wouldn't have had enough time to mend to the point that she could conceal her pain from his discerning eyes... unless she was a lot better at hiding pain then she should be, and he didn't like that at all.

Which might be another reason she hadn’t wanted him to see her last night after he got back… but surely Digg would’ve noticed if Helena had hurt her?

Oliver should have, too; t Q.C, but after the rush of relief at finding her still breathing he’d been distracted by light swelling around her slightly reddened eyes. The fact that she had been crying, that she’d been a lot more scared then she was willing to admit to him, had made him a lot angrier than he could remember being a long time. All his anger needed to fully focus on finding Helena and making her pay, even though she had showed more restraint then the archer had honestly expected.

Thinking back, Felicity had seemed very, very tired last night, which she obviously would’ve even without her encounter with Helena Bertinelli. But she’d also seemed smaller somehow… and drained. All of that combined with what he’d been afraid of and with the signs of the tears she’d shed, had been hard to push to the back of his mind as he’d sped towards the address she’d sent the Huntress to. Not managing to find her there, while not totally unexpected, hadn’t helped at all.

Oliver had ridden around a lot longer than he should have, after failing to catch up with Helena. Not really still trying to find her; just making himself calm down. Riding around Felicity's neighborhood again and again until he could make himself stop at her house again. Expecting her exhaustion, anger, tears—something. Under estimating just how good she was, yet again.
It'd made him wonder then if she was even remotely capable of all the negative emotions he was used to expecting. From himself and everybody else. He still wondered.

But now he also had to worry whether or not she might also be hiding from him. Because she had before. She'd hidden that somehow had attacked her. Hidden her injury. And when it'd come out, she'd refused to accept that it and how she'd gotten it mattered. Throughout all of that she'd been hiding how much she'd been working and how she hadn't been sleeping... What if she was hiding worse now?

“Are you okay?” Oliver asked as soon as he sat down next to her, the door clicking closed behind him before Digg was rounding the vehicle to get back to the front. The question wasn't planned, he wasn't sure if he should ask it, because demanding answers never worked well with her.

Felicity barely blinked. “I'm fine,” her reply was concise and matter-of-fact, and completely unhelpful.

Oliver kept watching her closely as he started to ask, “Helena didn't—”

“Oliver,” Felicity cut him off this time, meeting his worried eyes with a small smile. “I'm fine. Promise.”

He wanted to believe her. He really did.

All the same, he really couldn't shake the feeling that she was lying to him. About that, and maybe whatever other secrets she was still keeping.

But he still had more than a few big secrets of his own left. Some of which he would never share. So he didn’t let himself ask.

Not now.

Not yet.

Chapter End Notes
Maybe not what some of you were expecting, especially since several of you asked about the office being cleaned up in time. I will say that there will be more of the answers (or confirmations) that some of you want in the next scene. This was really just another peak inside Oliver's head. Yes, there was more there that you might see because you know a lot more about Felicity than Oliver does, but that's still kind of the point. Hopefully it was enjoyable.

I think there's less than ten scene left in this story, not a hundred percent sure yet, that's why I haven't added the number. But we're definitely closer to the end then the beginning of Bloody Secrets. On that, a question for those of you that care: I do have another 'movie night' planned for the end of this story, but a few of you mentioned that it didn't feel like it was part of the story in Deadly Dances. Would the dates be better as separate interludes between the stories?

Also, I already have a movie for this next movie night/date, and it's more than half written, but I'm open to suggestions on other movies that might work well. The main parameters are: (1) Keep the timeline in mind: S1 is 2012-2013, with The Huntress Returns we're currently in March of 2013, so the movies have to be out before then. (2) It has to be something I won't mind re-watching many times, which isn't that hard for a good movie to meet. And (3) is has to somehow fit within the context of the actions, secrets, relationships, etc. of the Felicitas series at the moment. Enchanted was Felicity using fantasy to help Oliver re-connect with the real world and unintentionally it may've made him even more protective of her. I won't explain the context/ideas of the next one, but the movie I've picked is Mr. & Mrs. Smith... because it seemed as bizarrely perfect as Enchanted did, just in a completely different way. So, anyway, I'd love some suggestions for other movies going forward.

...I will say ahead of time though: no Jurassic Park movies. Jurassic World wouldn't fit the timeline anyway, but I'm already writing an Arrow crossover with Jurassic World and it's gotten in my head (and vice versa) with this series more than once already.

After I've finished Butterfly Called Chaos, maybe, but not before. And, on that note: I am now editing the next chapter so the wait shouldn't be too much longer for there. The stories not nearly finished, of course, but the next chapter shouldn't be long.

As for the next scene of Bloody Secrets: it's done, too. Just editing now, which hopefully won't take too long.

Anyway, as always: thank you for reading. Comments are always welcome and very, very helpful! Thank you! :-D
And we're back! Sorry it took a little longer than normal. I wanted to update my Arrow crossover with Jurassic World, because they'd waited over a month, and the latest chapter wasn't one I was able to just plow through.

WARNING: Inferences to public suicide. (If you didn't look up who Felicitas' mother was before now, the myths about her end with her killing herself for different reasons. The earlier one is basically that she wasn't willing to remarry after she'd established her own kingdom: Carthage. The later, Roman one, indicated that she basically killed herself because the founder of Rome wasn't willing to stay with her. Obviously I'm leaning more towards the first one for Immortal-Felicity's mother.) Anyway, we see a flashback of Felicitas' POV of her mother's death. If suicide, death by fire, or a mother dying in front of her child disturb you too much even in fiction to read, you should probably skip over this flashback. Like always, it's in italics. And this one has a page-break before and after it, too.

Now, on with the scene!

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity was a little surprised when she entered the server room she'd had to leave in a hurry—and as a disaster—the night before.

Now it was spotless. As in every spot and speck she was expecting was at least half-expecting was nowhere to be seen.

She had known it should be. Nyssa al Ghul had accepted the task without the ancient even needing to ask her. By the time she'd texted the Pre-Immortal last night, her immediate response was that the cleanup was already underway. It wasn't long after that—only as long as her shower, which had to be longer than she'd like because forcing her wound to heal past the point where re-opening could be a problem took time—that more texts had followed. Reporting that the task was complete, and so the Immortal had only needed to cover the events of last night with the much more boring hours from midnight to 3 A.M a month ago.

Still, it was impressive.

Then again everything about Mazin's grand experiment was. Assuming he still hadn't let all the
power—or a Dark Quickening—go to his head. And Nyssa was his daughter, whether that was only by adoption or not hardly mattered in judging the results...

Of course, the little office wasn't cleaned like the cleaning staff had actually come in after she'd been dragged out of here last night.

Tatiana was a member of the hard-working cleaning crew Felicity particularly liked because she was always cheerful, even though the only times the Immortal saw the girl was when she happened to still be in the office long after business hours ended. The friendly girl couldn't have done this, though, because she'd stopped by a while before the Huntress's visit. The first time to say hello and quietly clean Felicity's workspace, and later to say goodbye after she'd completed the rest of the I.T floor. The sweet girl always did that, likely hoping the effort might manage to make Felicity not stay too long after even she'd gone home. Sometimes it worked; last night—with her returning to work not long before the cleaning lady had clocked in—it hadn't.

That was why Felicity had thought it should be okay to leave last night and just hurry in this morning, with every intention of borrowing some heavy-duty cleaning supplies out of the same closet Tatiana restocked her cart at each night. If the League hadn't been available and willing to help.

But now it looked like nothing had happened. Not immaculate like it would be if one of the cleaning staff had gone out of their way to really clean up. No. It just looked like nothing had happened here last night.

The blood, all of it, was gone. Completely.

Her desk looked exactly like it had before the Huntress had barged in and banged her around, except for the screensaver being on; Felicity could see the distorted reflection of the relaxing waves of color on the doors that kept most of the server refrigerated. Well, technically it was just air-conditioned, but it looked a lot like a fridge to her. Also, it was the reason this little room was always freezing, but that was besides the point. The glass wasn't cracked from when her chair had smashed to a stop by crashing into it.

Her chair... couldn't be her chair. It looked the same. Even looked like it was set correctly. But besides the sticky bloodstains she should have to wash off, there was no hole where the Huntress's crossbow bolt had first nailed her to it.

Felicity took a step closer, looking around as she did so, and turned sharply when she heard faint footsteps coming up behind her, heralded only a second earlier by the barely-there, not-yet-active
Buzz that her sixth sense—her own Quickening—still recognized.

It was harder to figure out sometimes; when the heart was calm and the blood was cool—when there was no reason for either not to be true—she might have to be standing right next to the not-yet-Immortal to be sure of who they were. She’d eventually found one of her former ‘students’ in one of the abbeys Felicitas had helped to found once upon a time as a sanctuary. But she’d had to shake the serene nun’s hand before she could be sure that Mariya was the Pre-Immortal she’d sensed at the time.

But this still mortal warrior was no nun. So Felicity wasn’t surprised to see Nyssa al Ghul standing in the doorway she’d just walked through. Surprised by how thoroughly the League of Assassins had come through for her on this, yes, but not at all by the presence of the Pre-Immortal herself.

“Good morning,” the assassin greeted her as she stepped inside far enough to close the door behind her. She wasn’t dressed for clubbing tonight, or assassinating for that matter; she looked more like an intern from Legal, Applied Sciences or Public Relations that’d gotten lost on the I.T floor with her stylish but bland pencil skirt and matching suit jacket over a dark a maroon blouse. “Honored one,” she finished the acknowledgement with the fully bowed head fist-over-the-heart salute that she’d only hinted at in public during Verdant’s opening.

“Good morning,” the ancient Immortal returned with the shallower, regal nod that was expected of her. “And welcome,” she added, giving the girl leave to relax without saying the words themselves.

Mazin’s daughter kept her head bowed a moment more before she lowered her warrior’s salute, her fist relaxing as it fell calmly to her side once more. “Ra’s al Ghul was most unhappy to hear of your most recent difficulties.”

“Yes. I was pretty unhappy about all of that, too.” Felicity replied, sighing as she walked around her desk, setting her purse down on it and sinking into the chair that could be mistaken for her old one. Except in addition to missing the blood and hole that was probably also bloody, the irritating squeak it’d been making for a while now was gone, too. “Thank you, again, for the clean-up,” she indicated the small room with both hands as she gingerly leaned back in her seat, trying to relax her back but careful not to put pressure on her still sore shoulder. The wound was closed, but it would still be a few days before all the soreness faded.

Non-fatal wounds really did suck; especially when she couldn't risk taking the time to meditate and encourage her Quickening to heal her more than she’d dared last night. Not when she knew sometimes glowed when she did that. While it probably wouldn't get her burnt at the stake again, Oliver would've probably noticed if there was a bright glow under her bedroom door when the lights started flickering on and off in the middle of the night. Even the brief moments of concentration she spared it to ensure it wouldn’t break open and start bleeding again had caused
enough of an electrical disturbance to worry Digg while she was in the shower.

She'd learned in more modern times that actively using your Quickening could do odd things to man-made electricity; the build-up of energy surging through the wires like they'd been plugged into a brand-new generator. Sometimes—like after one of them had fallen for good and their power was passing to another—the energy over-powered the circuits nearby to cause explosions and all the other ill-effects uncontrollable, escaping energy could cause. Control was key, and more power made that harder, especially in a hurry.

So Felicity couldn't completely heal herself yet. She had to wait for her Quickening to complete the job on her own, and try not to wince too much every time moving hurt, especially around either Diggle or Oliver. Both of who had already noticed far too many short moments of weakness.

“Such a discovery could have led to difficult questions, and we were honored to be of assistance,” Nyssa replied evenly. Then studied her for a moment before asking, “Helena Bertinelli is no warrior. A mere novice within the League could’ve handled her. Why did you let her harm you?”

The question surprised her, but Felicity knew it probably shouldn’t have. This girl, she could tell, had grown up hearing stories about her father’s teacher. Mazin may not know all or even most of Felicitas’ secrets, but even Methos had shared a few myths with him that a little girl who wanted to live up to her father's expectations of her would've loved to hear. And the woman that Nyssa was meeting now wasn’t the Immortal warrior the still young assassin was expecting. Felicity couldn’t be.

“I’m not a warrior here and now,” Felicity answered, voice deliberately both gentle but firm. “Here in Starling City I am a simple I.T girl.” She shook her head. “My being able to fight off someone like Helena Bertinelli at all could’ve led to just as many questions as this room before it was cleaned.”

“Only if she lived,” the assassin asserted.

Felicity didn’t let herself lick her lips, though she noted that she would have to apply chapstick soon. “Even if I wanted to kill her, I couldn't have. Not when Oliver was only minutes away.”

Mazin’s daughter considered that for a long moment, cocking her head to the side as she did so, before she straightened again and met the much older woman’s eyes once more. “And would you have killed her if his arrival and subsequent discovery were not imminent?”
“No,” Felicity admitted just as evenly.

The raven-haired beauty frowned, but only just: the disapproval was gone as quickly as it’d appeared. Her father had trained her well.

Felicity sighed, continuing before the Pre-Immortal could ask any more questions. “Much as your assistance last night was appreciated,” she indicated the office again before finishing. “This isn't what I called you for, Nyssa.”

“No,” the Demon’s Heir nodded, and again it was almost a bow. “Nonetheless, the League was honored to assist.”

“And I am grateful,” Felicity nodded back. “But I still need to know who hired—”

“The one called Deadshot to kill a mere bodyguard, yes.” The assassin surprised her again by cutting her off, explaining quickly. “We are looking into it. As are we looking into the activities of Al Sa-her here in your city.”

“Thank you,” Felicity nodded, watching the girl carefully, as she let both eyebrows go up a bit. “Was there anything else?”

Nyssa nodded. “The League was aware of Helena Bertinelli—”

“No.” Felicity interrupted this time, letting some of the regal command that never really went away no matter how long in betwixt when it was needed enter her voice. “She has nothing to do with any of this.”

“She threatened you, the most honored of all,” Nyssa wasn’t quite able to dismiss her frown this time as she said it. “She harmed you.”

“Only because I allowed it,” Felicity reminded her calmly. “You know that.”

The young warrior stubbornly shook her head. “That does not matter. By League Law—”
“The League’s Law is whatever Ra’s al Ghul says it is,” Felicity cut her off again, catching and holding her gaze this time much longer. “And your father swore to serve me long before you were born.”

“To serve you,” Nyssa nodded, then quickly added; “And protect you. For your grace and wisdom are far too rare, and far too precious to risk.” She insisted vehemently, frowning when her words made the ancient chuckle, light but sad.

“Many have said words like that,” Felicity told the much younger woman. “But my life and my choices are both my own to make. As are yours, Nyssa al Ghul.” She cocked her head to the side like she’d watched the Pre-Immortal do earlier when she was thinking, holding her eyes all the while. “Yet you have sworn yourself to the League, and to the will of Ra’s al Ghul.”

“I have,” Nyssa bowed her head once again, already acknowledging the point the Immortal was making.

Felicity waited a moment before she went on calmly. “Helena Bertinelli is one mortal woman. She is alone in the world, and afraid—and her fears can make her dangerous. But not to me.” She shook her head. “So long as the crossbow or guns are her weapons of choice, the only injuries she can cause me are minor inconveniences.”

“The amount of blood spilled in this room only hours ago says otherwise.”

“But I’ve still got my head.” Felicity said, shaking it again. “While I don’t approve of her choices, what quarrels I might have with her are not worth ending her life. Not to me.” She paused a moment, then observed, “Besides, threatening me aside, I’d think the League would approve of Helena Bertinelli’s typical targets. She has mostly gone around killing criminals.”

“Before she targeted you, perhaps,” Nyssa nodded again, and this time it looked less like a bow, and the edges of her lips stayed down. “Her methods, however, are both crude and erratic. Far from worthy of any consideration from Ra’s al Ghul.”

Something about the girl’s unwillingness to let the issue go made Felicity frown and study her more closely. After several long moments of consideration—that again proved to her that going too long without enough rest combined with any significant injury was not a good thing for even an ancient Immortal—everything came together and made her frown deepen.
“You didn’t kill her.” Felicity could be sure of that at least. If Mazin was still loyal to her, his followers would never break his word to her—and she hadn’t given them permission to harm anyone within her home city. Despite his daughter's efforts to get that permission from her this morning.

Nyssa nodded, and this time it was certainly a bow—as her head remained tilted down as she replied. “Not yet.”

Felicity waited only a few breaths for her to go on, before she realized she hadn’t actually called for the report. “What have you done?”

The Pre-Immortal raised her head again, standing straight and proud as she answered, with only a barely discernible hesitation before a few of her words displaying her otherwise very well hidden unease. “As you know, League Law does not take action within the home of an honored one without their leave. And none are more honored than you, my lady.”

It was a relief to here that that was still true. Somewhat.

It'd always made her uncomfortable, since the League's inception, how Mazin made his followers venerate not just himself, but Felicitas, too. All the honors and the real power that came with them reminded her very much of the now ancient times when sovereigns were worshipped as almost gods. As gods, in some cases. Some of them even really believed it of themselves, to their detriment. Felicitas had never been so impractical; even in her mortal lifetime power had never really gone to her head. The luck and good fortune in the royal lady that’d decided to adopt her as a foundling easily outweighed by first her mother's gentle wisdom and strength, and all her lessons driven home into her daughter's head by watching her step onto a burning pyre so that her time might end with her daughter's reign rising secure...

All the same, it was almost a relief to hear that that level of near worship was still expected of the League as a whole. If it was true, after all, then the chances of her student having succumbed to a Dark Quickening in recent years were greatly diminished. If it was true.

If, if, if...

“Whatever reason the woman might once have had is lost to her thirst for vengeance, which knows no bounds. The object of her rage, her father, did indeed earn it—yet she is her father’s daughter. In seeking her revenge upon him, she will not hesitate to harm or kill others if it suits her.” The
Demon’s Heir put forward, her voice persuasive and well-practices in this style or presentation that her father had undoubtedly expected of her from a very young age. “And she did harm you, honored one. By your leave—”

“No,” Felicity shook her head, meeting the young woman's dark eyes steadily.

“My lady, the woman is mad—”

“Yes, she is,” the Immortal cut in again. “But she was driven to that madness by betrayals and tragedies I could never wish on anyone.” Felicity raised a hand to forestall any further protest. “Can you imagine how it felt, Nyssa? When her own father killed her fiancé for something she, herself, had done? How would you respond to that?”

The Heir's stern facade cracked, her lips being pulled down by a frown as the storm that'd been in her eyes the whole time was slightly unleashed. “My father would never do such a thing.”

And Felicity hoped she was right, but that wasn't the point of this conversation. This lesson. So she shook her head. “I'm sure Helena once thought that, too.”

Nyssa shook her head. “The Bertinellis are criminals, my lady. My family—our family, is not. Honor and purpose do not exist in the minds of mobsters, only selfishness, greed and revenge.”

“We're all selfish, Nyssa. It's how we survive. We're all greedy, wanting more than what we have is what drives us to work harder. And we all want revenge when someone hurts us or someone we care for... wanting revenge against someone else we love would, I imagine, hurt all the more,” Felicity shook her head to forestall the girl's protest this time. “Honor and duty are what we all should want to be, not what we all are. There would hardly be any value in them if they were easy to attain—but some of us start off in far better circumstances than others. And showing compassion and mercy to those less fortunate than ourselves is the heart of honor and duty.”

“We cannot change what was, only what will be,” Nyssa said the words like a mantra, and the ancient had to smile a little at having one of her own lessons repeated back at her. “You taught my father that.”

“I tried to teach him how to let go of the past, yes, and I'd like to think I had some success.” Felicity nodded, then shook her head. “But I never taught him to forget...” she trailed off, waiting to see what next came out of Mazin's daughter's mouth.
“Remember your mistakes, and learn from them,” another one of her lessons was repeated for what'd clearly been one of many, many times.

This time the ancient shook her head again. “Not just your mistakes, Nyssa. Everyone's. Their mistakes, and their other decisions, too. Everything we do will impact the future. It's made of the present, just as the present is made up of the past...” She trailed off, shaking her head slowly. “But you did not come to me for philosophical debate. You came to me for permission to kill within my home. You will not get it.”

The young warrior's brow furrowed in undisguised unhappiness. “Would it appease you if she was first removed from your city?”

“No, it would not,” Felicity smiled. “You already knew that, but I'm glad to see you starting to think outside the box.”

“Only a blood-thirsty fool thinks kill or be killed are a warrior's only options,” Nyssa quoted yet another one of the ancient's adages at her, looking thoughtful as she tried to work her way through the problem.

Now Felicitas had to blink, and her eyes narrowed a little at that one. “Did you study some of your father's notes before coming here?” she asked, because that wasn't a lesson she imagined Mazin going out of his way to teach too much, as he fought with it himself. He had already been the leader of a group of assassins—the start of the League of Assassins—when he's first found her. It was a lesson a leader had to learn, but not one they could all be expected to teach.

Her question startled the assassin into blinking once herself. “No, my lady,” Nyssa shook her head. “Your words of wisdom are taught to all of the League's initiates. I learned them well as a child at Nanda Parbat. My father believes comprehension of your philosophies is the surest glue the League can have.”

That made Felicity swallow slowly, “I am...” she paused for a second in thought, then nodded. “Happy to hear it.”

“Then you will allow—”

“No,” Felicity's lips quirked upward a little. “If you learned my lessons so well, Nyssa al Ghul,
surely you can come up with a solution here,” She raised an eyebrow at the young woman, then watched her think it through, because simply giving a student an answer was not how they learned anything.

The displeasure that overtook the young woman's beautiful face a moment later told the ancient she'd figured out what her elder was willing to allow. “The Huntress harmed you, Nar al-Abad,” Nyssa shook her head from side to side, not even trying to hide her unhappiness. “Were you mortal you would not have survived losing so much blood. Your beloved would have found you here dying, or already dead.”

“You of all people should know the human body can withstand a great deal if the mind within it is strong enough,” Felicitas reprimanded lightly, her tone perhaps a little harder than it needed to be after the use of the formal laqab that all of the League of Assassins knew her by, which she never particularly liked to hear. “Nevertheless, I called you here for information, not protection, and not retribution of any kind. That has not changed.”

*Nar al-Abad, The Eternal Flame.* It was almost as bad as the other name Mazin tried to honor her with: *The Phoenix*, or al-Phoenix, since the word had come to mean singular in Arabic as much as it referred to the mythological bird. [1]

She had never served within the League of Assassins herself, of course, nor would she ever be expected to. But Mazin had passed her teachings onto his warriors, and made no secret of it, affording her the highest degrees of respect from their very first meeting onward.

The word 'Phoenix' was supposedly rooted in the Phoenician people of the past, which her people had been among. Her mother also came to be known by the epithet 'Phoenissa,' as the Greeks respected the royal lady's courage and her sacrifice. They, at least, recognized how much Carthage—and the empire it grew into from that one great city on a large hill—owed its founding queen. The Romans, however, thereafter reduced her to the wretched Elissa: the beautiful queen of a by-then destroyed enemy nation, who chose to kill herself not for duty or for real love, but because she fell for a Roman man who could not love her back. Would not. Could not... It hardly mattered in the end, since the man they claimed her mother killed herself over was born centuries after her death. After her sacrifice. For her people... and for her daughter. The glory tying her last tale to the mythological bird that burnt and then rose from its own ashes again to live on for eternity—in a never-ending cycle her daughter kept watching go round—was lost after Rome finally destroyed the city that, by then, remembered its founder as little more than a legend, and by some of the many marble statues that the Roman soldiers had shattered.

More than that was the simple fact that in ancient times, bodies were committed to the flames rather than the earth or the sea, supposedly to set the spirit free. But her mother had chosen to step onto the pyre while still alive, willingly, for her. Cementing the peoples devotion in the royal daughter they watched scream and sob when she was still young enough to inspire pity instead of
scorn for such shows of emotion. All likely bound up in some magic spell that Dido hadn't had the
time to teach her daughter as anything other than basic theories. The people's memory of that night
had both kept her human, relatable to her people, and deified her as the great Queen Dido's
daughter in one horrifically masterful display...

“You need to be strong, my little one. Remember, always: strength and love,” Dido had said as the
priest approached her with the torch that would be used to set the pyre to bid a final farewell to her
now long dead husband. She ignored the man standing there and all the people watching them, her
eyes locked with her daughters. “Prom-Promise me, Felicitas,” It was strange for the well-spoken
queen to stumble over any words, so the repetition that followed wasn’t a surprise. “Promise me.”

Felicitas had readily agreed as she stared into her mother's eyes, though the weight of the queen’s
hands on her shoulders had seemed strangely heavy. “I promise, Imm.” [2]

Dido had drawn her into her arms, holding her tight.

For the first time standing before the people of Carthage the princess was uncomfortable. Not
because her childhood had ever lacked for affection, but because she'd been brought up knowing
that one must set a good example before the people and strength was an important part of that.
Considering what she’d only just promised, the princess couldn't help but be confused, but had
she'd known what was to come she would've clung to her mother and never let her go.

“Strength and love. Remember,” Dido repeated. Her hands were almost painfully tight now, her
nails pressing into the little girl's shoulders.

But the princess couldn't bring herself to protest. She could only stare at her mother in confusion,
and worry; not understanding why she was afraid but knowing that something was very wrong.

“I love you, my daughter, always,” Dido kissed her forehead, then both her cheeks, and her
forehead again. “Remember, always.”

Felicitas' lower lip had started to tremble a little as she watched her mother rise gracefully from
where she’d been kneeling on the marble steps, hugging and kissing her daughter in front of
everyone like she was going away again and everyone had to know it.

She was going away, the princess knew. For the peace they had to go to another city where her
mother would marry again. But they were going together...weren't they?

“Imm?” it slipped out without conscious thought, but her mother only squeezed her shoulders
tighter for a second before she turned the princess towards her head-handmaiden. “Take care of
her, Cirke.”

“My queen?” the loyal servant sounded just as confused as her charge, which didn't make the
princess feel any better as they watch her mother turn to finally accept the flaming torch from the
high priest.

“My beloved people," the Queen called in that voice that somehow seemed to reach every ear,
carrying however far it needed to in order for everyone here to hear her. “Long years have we all
worked so hard to make our city the great and beautiful home it has become. Everyone here has
the right to stand with us now, for only together are we strong. Together, some of us crossed the
vast sea to find our friends here. Together, we all came to make this jewel upon the seashore. And
here we are together, now, facing the threat of war.”
Felicitas wanted to go to her mother, wanted to reach for the hand that wasn't still holding that huge flaming torch aloft, the flames there feeling uncomfortably hot from even as far away as she was.

How hot would they be when all that wood was burning? It was by far the largest funeral pyre she'd ever seen; fit for the king it was meant to honor, though the man that might've been her father if it hadn't been his murder that caused his widows flight had been dead for years now. Longer than Felicitas had been alive.

“If the Fates were kind, I would not choose to leave you. I would not choose to leave what work we still to have do here yet undone. I would stand with you, together. Always.” The city's founder went on after another breath, her words still echoing around the finely constructed marble walls that made up the palace and most of the city, too. “But I must go, to my husband, as it would seem all desire.”

So saying, the queen finally lowered the torch down to the kindling, holding it there even as the dry, heavily perfumed wood caught flame. Almost instantly it was bright and hot, a burning beacon before all the city's eyes as the last light of the setting sun faded from the horizon.

Felicitas couldn't quite smile as she heard a low rumble of grumbling protests from down on the streets—where so many of the good people, too, had no more desire to see their royal ladies leave than either lady wanted to. It made several of the counselors—the ones that'd convinced the queen that her wedding to the Berber king was the only path to peace—shift uncomfortably.

But there Queen was still speaking, so no one dared speak too loudly lest they risk missing her words.

“So I take my leave of my daughter, of my home, and of all of you.”

Felicitas' eyes widened, the thought that she might actually be left behind, here at home but without her mother, having never occurred to her.

Cirke knelt down next to her to wrap an arm around her protectively. It was a gesture that the royal wouldn't have allowed under any other circumstances, but surely learning that she was to lose the only family she had left—even if it was only to some place maybe not too far away—meant she could accept some comfort from her friend in public.

“And I pray,” Dido went on. “That you will remember us. Remember me, but take your new queen into your hearts. For it is with you and all your love that my dear daughter belongs.” She shook her head, smiling slightly when the discontented rumblings of the city grew a little louder. “Fret not for my fate, my beloved people. For so long as you hold sweet Felicitas in your hearts, I shall be with all of you. My prayers are yours, just as yours are mine. And Kart-Hadasht will stand whole, with all of us together. That is my choice. This is my choice. Remember that. Stay strong together. And the gods favor shall stay with us all.”

Felicitas tried to shift forward when the Queen looked at her, but it wasn't even a full step because Cirke was still holding her in a hug that didn't do anything against the pain she could see in her mother's eyes. “Imm?” she asked softly.

“For thee well, my dearest Felicitas,” Dido said then, her voice not quite as impressive in volume but still seeming to echo off all of the marble around them.

Or maybe it was just because everyone else was so quiet and she was only competing with the crackling of the still growing flames and the pounding of her daughter's heart.
“And so I bid farewell to all of Carthage,” Dido looked out over the city's gathered people again. “Asking only that you remember us. All that we are, and all that we will be. Together.”

Then she leapt into the flames...

And Felicitas could never be sure, thinking back, if the screams were more her mother's or her own.

The Phoenix and The Eternal Flame, two descriptors that were in some ways interchangeable. Both were meant to praise her origins for the myths and legends that they'd become, that they would've frowned from if her brother hadn't done his very best to make her fade from memory.

Nowadays no one knew Dido really had had a daughter who'd inherited her throne, adopted Pre-Immortal or not. Her sacrifice had insured that the people were almost fanatically loyal to their new queen: their fervor ensuring that all the countless suitors who came to court for her hand in marriage had to be very brave men. The princess had lost count of how many there were before her advisors finally chose one of the mightiest warriors.

That Eligius had been the son of the same Berber king that'd originally given the land for Carthage to Dido—the same chieftain that'd laughed at the trickery, delighted by her cleverness and still a good friend to them thereafter—had helped her accept the match. That his tribe had been longtime enemies of the tribe that'd tried to steal her mother away and thereby caused her death had helped too. As had the fact that he was only a few years older than her, handsome and kind—his gentleness towards her clear through his actions even if it was weeks before she'd mastered his dialect so they could speak without an interpreter. She'd mastered many of the Tamazight dialects before her marriage, of course, but each tribe's being different—some somehow almost entirely different languages themselves—had meant that her tutors couldn't focus on her mastery of a specific one for common conversations outside of trade agreements and the like until her groom was chosen for her. Of course it was his army, the largest of all the Berber nations, that'd been the selling point for her advisors.

But the people of Carthage, like their queen, had been won over by the gentle respect he treated her with every day of his life—and the fact that he seemed to easily accept that while defending their home was his duty, ruling over it was hers. While a mighty warrior, Eligius had had no mind for politics or negotiations and his view of justice was often too harsh for a nation as a whole. Anyone fool enough to make themselves an enemy of Carthage he would make regret it, but he knew that making friends and keeping the peace was better left to his wife. A mighty warrior and a wise man.

“Nar al-Abad?” Nyssa al-Ghul's concerned voice brought her out of her ponderings again, and when she looked at her she saw the young woman wasn't even trying to hide that concern on her face either.
Then again, she'd undoubtedly noticed when the ancient flinched at the title, never mind however long she was lost in memories just now. She really did need to catch up on all the sleep she'd denied herself recently.

Felicitas knew the titles were meant to honor her, of course, but she couldn't not remember those flames every time she heard it. Aware of her dislike for the reminders, Mazin only used the titles in the most formal of League settings, where his teacher would be expected to recognize him as Ra al-Ghul, though even then he was still her student and she his teacher...

So for Nyssa al-Ghul to use it so easily now, when they were alone and with no need for ceremony startled her. Though it was further proof that the niece she'd only recently met had been brought up with more tales of her aunt than might've been wise. The admiration the young woman had treated her with since her arrival here in Starling City was more than what even the Demon's Head demanded of his followers, so it was certainly more than he'd expect from his daughter and so-called Heir.since their first

“I'm fine,” Felicity forced herself to say, shaking her head slowly. “Sorry. Just caught up in memories for a moment. It happens, after a while.”

The other woman dipped her chin in another nod that was almost another bow. “Of course, 'Ama,” she agreed softly.

And the ancient had to smile to show her the familial designation was much more welcome than the League titles. While she'd never really met the girl that she’d thought Mazin adopted after his wife's death, Felicity had sent her congratulations along with her condolences when she welcome the girl into their strange 'family.' That she now knew there was certainly more to the origins of Nyssa al-Ghul than the Immortal girl's father had led her to believe from afar was neither here nor there. She was still the same niece she'd sent at least a birthday present to every year. That Mazin had never wanted the ancient to meet his daughter face-to-face, saying it might interfere with her training—which had in and of itself very nearly made her just head for Nanda Parbat anyway—just made more sense now.

“She does not deserve mercy, 'Ama,” Nyssa insisted unhappily, her voice still subdued. “Let alone any reward.”

“Perhaps,” Felicity almost made the mistake of shrugging, but caught herself just as the start of the motion began to pull at her still mending injury, her history with all too recent past injuries there making it easy enough for her body to simply relax out of the almost mistake rather than tense up into what would only cause her more pain. “Perhaps not,” She cocked her head to the side
thoughtfully. “Your initiates do not have it easy, and most of them must come from very hard lives themselves. They are forgiven their faults when they join the League, and afforded the opportunity to work towards redemption, are they not?”

“The League does not accept madmen, or madwomen,” Nyssa bit out. “Nor killers who think nothing of harming innocents,” her frown deepened. “You, yourself, made my father swear to that, did you not? That the moral codes of the League would remain above reproach?”

“That was one of the promises I asked of him, yes,” Felicity nodded, then shook her head. “None of the mobsters Helena killed were innocents.”

“You—”

“Nor, truly, am I.”

Nyssa shook her head. “As far as she knows now, knew then, you are. Yet she harmed you only out of spite—jealousy that your beloved is not hers. And undoubtedly never was. Hateful of the fact that he would not help her now that he has you.”

Felicity blinked. “I thought you were making someone who resembles the Dark Archer rescue her?”

That was what'd it looked like on the S.C.P.D's recordings. But how, then, was the young woman in front of her so sure of what the Huntress's reasoning—or lack thereof—was?

“I did,” Nyssa nodded again. “I believe al-Owal would've enjoyed the challenged of the task. If not for the woman herself. He did not care for her.”

The Immortal's lips quirked a bit in amusement. “I take it she wasn't grateful?”

“No,” Nyssa replied flatly. “She was quite displeased your Vigilante would delegate her rescue to another. 'Some 'lackey,' I believe she called him.”

“Doubt al-Owal liked that,” Felicity's smile grew a little bit. Sure of it, in fact, as she had met the
other Immortal that Mazin often left the initial training of new recruits to more than once before.

“He did not, but no form of reproach was permissible at the time.” Nyssa paused, then pointedly reminded her. “You did want her to contact your beloved as soon as possible after her rescue,” She shook her head. “Al-Owal has taught many the importance of obeying the commands we are given, he would never deviate from his mission without far greater excuse than a bitter woman's vicious tongue,” she paused after another headshake, then added, “He was glad, I believe, that you did not command him to speak to her. Though his silence may have angered her further.”

Felicity laughed a little at that, “Please give al-Owal my apologies for the difficulties then, and my thanks for a job well done.”

“Of course, 'Ama,” Mazin’s daughter bowed her head. Then raised it again. “It would have been far easier to kill her. The Magician has at least ensured that a black arrow in this city will not immediately be blamed on your beloved.”

“I know,” Felicity winced, because that thought had crossed her mind. But even after she’d had to let the mortal madwoman shoot her—even with the hole in her shoulder still only half-healed—she couldn't regret not calling for Helena Bertinelli's death.

In fact, it might associate the Huntress more closely with the Dark Archer and thus remove at least some of the suspicion inherent from his having dated her from Oliver.

Or it might just make the S.C.P.D think the Christmas Hostage Crisis and the showdown between the two archers was just a show, which wouldn't necessarily be a good thing at all. That very publicized event was one of the many turning points in the public's opinion regarding the green hooded vigilante. When he'd started to turn in many minds from a strange killer into a hero. While bringing it into question might not be a completely turn around, it could still be more than one step back. This, the Dark Archer rescuing the Huntress, however, could still just be a curve-ball that might help.

The S.C.P.D had only the words of criminals connecting the Huntress to the Hood. The only physical evidence was one or two green arrows that'd been left behind—and the Dark Archer could've grabbed those back before Christmas. When they were working together against Frank Bertinelli, the cops never saw them together. The only time they saw the Hood in relation to the Huntress was on the Bertinelli security cameras—when he intervened to try and stop the erupting mob war with the Triad. Bertinelli himself was the one that said his daughter shot him but the Hood saved him before taking her away—and his opinion on both the daughter who'd just betrayed him and the Vigilante who'd saved him that night but had undoubtedly been a concern for months before then was hardly unquestionable.
So the Dark Archer supposedly showing up to rescue Helena should work. Even better, it made sense when one took into account that the Hood had been killing fewer and fewer criminals even, while the Huntress was dropping bodies carelessly almost everywhere she was seen. Sure, she had seemed to make an effort here in Starling City—probably to stay on Oliver's good side when she needed his help—but some of the other crime scenes around the world were just as grizzly as the ones before Oliver had tried to reform her. One was even more so.

So maybe she wasn't an ally of the Hood. The Dark Archer was the one that killed without warning. The one that took hostages when most people were celebrating the holidays. And apparently the one that'd broken her out shortly after she'd been caught by the cops.

It should work.

Felicity hoped.

“Then why, 'Ama?” her niece asked her, the disapproval of earlier replaced more by concern. “Why not end the problem? If she dies today, she's safe from tomorrow's crimes.”

Felicity blinked at the proverb, but then shook her head. “Oliver thinks she can be saved.”

Well, maybe he didn't any more. But he had cared about Helena Bertinelli once, had really tried to help her.

That was what'd stopped her, really. The desire to help anyone wasn’t something Felicity could look down on. And she was keeping enough secrets from her boyfriend—his crazy ex's execution at her command couldn't be another one.

“Your beloved—”

“He wants her to be saved,” Felicity cut her off, holding her gaze as she shook her head again. “I can't do that myself. She can't stay here—and she'd never listen to me anyway.” She raised both eyebrows as the younger woman, who was again frowning. “Can you honestly tell me that my request is one the League has not received in years past?”
“No,” Nyssa’s frown looked more like a scowl now. “My father has on occasion accepted those
even we might call criminals before, allowing them to reform and redeem themselves within the
League, though only a rare few make it so far,” She shook her head. “But none of them had
committed crimes against the League itself.”

“The only crime she's committed that could be called that is when she hurt me, and I allowed
it. I will not call for her death and I will not allow it,” Felicity said it again to be clear. “But I will
ask you to give her this second chance.”

“Her third chance, you mean,” the Heir to the Demon kept scowling at her for a long moment, then
sighed. “Not all survive the training alone.”

“I know.”

“She will not be cosseted. Nor offered any special dispensations. She can't be.”

“I know.”

“Ra's al Ghul will not like this.”

“He won't,” the ancient nodded. “But he will allow it.”

Only because she was the one who'd asked. Methos might be the only other person in the world
that could ask such a thing of the Leader of the League of Assassins and expect the request to be
granted. But knowing that was why she'd asked.

And it was a good as way as any to test the strength of her student’s present loyalty from afar.
True, if he acted the way she expected him to it could merely be because he knew it was what was
expected and thus meant to deceive her. But it might not be… Truth be told, she’d likely wonder if
Mazin had already gone Dark until she met him face to face again and could sense it for herself,
but that didn’t mean she had to cut all ties with him before that.

The Demon's daughter didn't look any happier as she stubbornly insisted, “I will not train her
myself.”
Felicity smiled a little, “That choice is of course your right,” She waited a moment for another objection, then tilted her head to the side. “Does that mean you'll see it done?”

Nyssa closed her eyes, then sighed, before opening them and meeting her gaze again as she bowed her head. “As it is your command, Nar al-Abad, I shall see it through as my duties demand.”

Instead of wincing, the ancient almost wanted to roll her eyes. “Thank you, Nyssa,” she nodded back, though not quite as deeply. “Please give my regards to your father.”

The Pre-Immortal frowned again. “I cannot yet return home.”

“Why not?” Felicity asked flatly, “Your tasks here are done.”

“They are not,” Nyssa shook her head. “The murder of your friend's brother has not yet been solved —”

“You said the League is already looking for Deadshot,” Felicity reminded her. “Unless you have a reason to believe he'll return again to Starling City very soon, there's no need for you to wait for him here.”

The younger woman was quiet for several long moments, then she shook her head. “Your wounds have not yet healed, 'Ama.”

“They will,” Felicity told her. “By this time tomorrow I should be as good as new.”

Wouldn’t that be nice? The shallow slice to her shoulder had been an annoyance because she’d had to slow it’s healing… well, more then she had, really. But she was not about to re-cut and heal her shoulder again, so letting Oliver and Diggle see it’d healed seemed like the best solution. Though that would’ve worked far better if not for the crossbow bolt shot and twisted through it, then pulled out.

Her poor shoulder had really had had enough pain for a very long time. She knew better than to favor any part of her body other than her neck, but she probably wouldn’t be able to help having more care for her shoulder for quite some time now.
Nyssa was quiet a little too long, but she spoke before the ancient could do more than cock her head to the side in curiosity. “If you do not intend to protect yourself, 'Ama, you should have—”

“No,” Felicity cut in flatly, not liking where this was going at all. “I have no need of guards. I'm a lowly I.T girl in this lifetime.”

“Only a fool could ever consider you low, 'Ama,” Nyssa immediately shot that down. “And your beloved's choices bring with him no small amount of danger for you even without your regular assistance, as your most recent injury proved.” She went on quickly before the ancient could decide if she wanted to argue about this or just shut it down. “Your beloved aside, what will you do if a headhunter finds you in Starling City?”

“One already did,” Felicity replied evenly. “I scared him off easily enough. He's not even headhunting anymore. Apparently he's taken up art instead. Or just studying art, Methos didn't actually say which.”

Nyssa's face stayed fixed in stern lack of emotion for a moment as she processed that, then she shook her head. “Not all headhunters will be so easily turned, 'Ama.”

“I've been around a very long time,” Felicity reminded her. “I've faced more headhunters then even you can imagine, Nyssa. You're very young. But trust me when I say that I am quite capable of defending myself.” When it looked like the younger woman might try to work herself into another angle of debate, she closed. “But even ancient Immortals need rest to heal well. And I won’t get any rest until I’ve finished my work.”

“Of course,” Nyssa bowed her head again. “By your leave then.”

“Have a nice day,” Felicity nodded, watching the younger woman bow before opening the door again and leaving.

She forced herself not to think too much about the fact that Nyssa al Ghul hadn’t yet agreed to anything. Other than accepting her choice for Helena Bertinelli, of course. But everything else, it would seem, remained open for now…

Felicity, however, didn’t have the time to think about that right now.
Now, she had to first make sure that nothing suspicious made it to the building’s security recordings. Both last night and this morning. Her quick switch of the recorded hours would stand up to scrutiny just yet. Then she’d need to quickly double-check that all her work from last night had finished on its own despite the interruption and later lack of supervision. And all of that had to be done before her meeting with Moira Queen on the top floor of the building…

Fortunately, it wasn’t even eight o’clock yet.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's the new scene. Finally.
There's obviously a few more explanations between the lines here. I hope it made sense.
I'm sure some of you aren't going to like the placement of the flashback. I did consider dropping it, and maybe just adding it to the series as an interlude or something like that, but for me this seemed to make more sense. And it's not like Nyssa (and Felicity) didn't notice that she completely spaced out for a minute there. Not this time. Though many of the previous times where she was thinking (even in the middle of fights) were written that way for a reason, too. Mainly because she is that skilled that all her attention doesn't always have to be on the fight, and she can't stop herself from thinking sometimes. Yes, it's something that could come back to bite her at just the wrong moment, but I never said Felicitas was perfect. Oliver might think that, but I certainly didn't say it. But she's also lived a very long life, and bad memories can sometimes pop up even when you don't want to be thinking about them, so I still think it makes sense.

Also, until we actually see her teaching anyone about her Immortality, etc., there's not going to be any outright explanations that don't fit in with her thoughts for that moment, but I will say that in Highlander the Quickening can be used to by some powerful Immortals to do many different things that seem like magic. Most Immortals can't use it that way. They become stronger as their Quickening grows (with age and by beheading other Immortals), but without taking the time to learn how to use that power itself, it's just indicated that it makes them more powerful somehow. In my mind, that means they heal faster, but they also might be stronger and faster, etc., too. In the Arrow-verse, with super-soldiers and magic both on the table, well, the sky's the limit, really... But basically the Quickening is what makes them Immortal and it's pure power. I hope that makes some sense.

Now, from within the scene itself:
[1] If anyone knows of an actual Arabic word for 'Phoenix,' and can spell it out for me phonetically, please share it. The only alternative I found to the note about the word Greek/Latin-rooted word meaning singular among Arabs due to the myth was another term for the constellation: Al-Ankaa or Al-Anka-oo, and I couldn't find a translation for what it actually meant beyond being the Arabic name for that constellation...
[2] "Imm" means "Mother" in the Punic language according to canaanite.org. In the instance it was used in, it obviously was how Felicitas was saying "Mommy" or "Mama," etc.
And that's it.
The next scene shouldn't take nearly as long. Though the one many people seem to be
waiting for will be the one after that. Both are mostly done at this point, but you see in my author's notes, at least, what my writing tends to look like before I've revised it a few times. And there's a few things I'm still working on, too.
Still, ideas, suggestions, questions and comments of all kinds are always welcome! Thanks for reading! More to come soon. :-)  
~ Jess S
John watching the other man go up and back down that stupid ladder of his a dozen times before he said anything, not at all motivated to change out of the suit and tie he hadn't had the easiest time putting on this morning after next to no real sleep. "She took it that bad, huh?"

"What?" the masochist actually just hung up there on the bar, sparing himself the brief breath it took to ask the one word question, before he got going again.

"The door?" The bodyguard rolled his eyes, because while there were more than a few things he could be asking about right now, that was the one he thought might make the most sense.

And he didn't feel like diving right into whether or not they should've stayed at *Queen Consolidated* after they dropped Felicity off. Something he was sure the vigilante had been thinking about doing, and Oliver probably would've if the archer wasn't also probably sure that John Diggle would put a bullet in Helena Bertinelli if he saw her again.

Or maybe not. The angry archer *had* all but said he planned to put an arrow in the Huntress last night. Before she'd vanished.
Still, his friend couldn't really shake the suspicion that, after a night—or at least a few hours—to sleep on it, Oliver might not revert to form and want to save the try and bitch from herself. Again.

*Swing... THUD!*

The only reason that might not be true, as far as John could see, was that Helena Bertinelli had gone after Felicity. And Oliver seemed about as inclined to forgive that as John was: as in *not at all.*

*Swing... THUD!*

Of course, John was still kicking himself over not anticipating it. He'd *understood* why Oliver hadn't wanted Felicity anywhere near his crazy ex even after he'd let himself be blackmailed into working for the madwoman.

And the professional bodyguard had put himself in between the two women automatically when they were both in this basement at the same time. Even before the brunette murderess had shot the blonde genius that glance that'd looked more speculative than jealous. Which was right after their tech expert had actually *said* she could do *exactly* what the other woman wanted from them.

*Swing... THUD!*

Why then, hadn't it occurred to him that Felicity could be the next place Helena would go after trying to take the vans coming from the courthouse had failed?

Sure, her being arrested had slowed her down and complicated everything even more. What with Oliver thinking he had to break her out, never mind the other archer *rescuing* her instead.

Yet *another* train of thought the soldier didn't plan to hop aboard anytime soon. Not without more information or more sleep; preferably both.

But he *should have* realized that Helena Bertinelli would have more reasons than just jealous—and a loose grasp on her sanity—to go after Felicity. Especially since he knew that the Huntress's uncompromising drive for vengeance had been enough to bring down the entire branch of the mob her father had headed here in Starling City. Not an easy feet at all, and a clearer look into her mindset than Oliver had been willing to admit to himself back them. The vigilante hadn't been
willing to see it then till it was almost too late back then, but his bodyguard had seen it just fine. So why hadn't he this time?

*Swing... THUD!*

"Actually..." Oliver said as reached the top and started coming back down again. "I'm not sure she noticed it."

*Swing... THUD!*

John blinked at him, then shook his head. "Come again?"

"The door..."

*Swing... THUD!*

"Did she see it..."

*Swing... THUD!*

"Before you fixed it?"

"Yeah, she saw it," the bodyguard replied dryly. "I wasn't exactly gonna just stop at her house to fix it after you called me back."

No, after the terse, abrupt callback that Oliver had managed as he was speeding downtown himself, John Diggle wasn't about to stop anywhere till he'd seen their third team member was safe for himself.

*Swing... THUD!*
Afterwards he was more than willing to fix the door for her when she asked. After all, with the vigilante's crazy ex burning rubber and shooting her crossbow all around town, a broken door rendered her house a lot less safe than it otherwise might be considered.

So yes, the ex-soldier would've volunteered to help the computer genius. Because Felicity Smoak had fast become one of the dearest friends he'd ever known. And the idea of her not having solid walls and locked doors between herself and the Huntress, at the very least, couldn't sit well with him.

That repaired door might not stop her. It'd probably only slow her down a little bit longer than it had Oliver—if she didn't just go in through a window instead—but it was still one more measure to make her more secure.

Just like the home security system she really should've had on last night. Why she didn't want to use it, John doubted he'd ever understand. Whether it was 'just something her big brother had insisted on,' or not. Then again, he'd been a big brother all his life, until Andy's murder...

"She didn't say anything," Oliver told him.

"About the door?" John shook his head, not waiting for confirmation. "She asked me to fix it while we were waiting for you. So yeah, she definitely knew it was broken."

The bodyguard had been a bit surprised himself by how easily the blonde had accepted the busted in door. One long glance, followed by an equally long sigh was all she'd spared it before she'd simply asked him if he'd mind fixing it for her. Like it was the sort of thing you just had to accept and let go. Completely normal.

Last night John had more than half chalked it into the same circle as the tired but still odd calmness with which she'd accepted everything else that'd happened. Now, it still didn't fit together well, but it was another thing that wouldn't without more information and/or sleep.

"Swing... THUD!"
Thinking back on it and watching the vigilante now, John was half tempted to mention all the other men in the neighborhood that'd apparently be more than happy to help the petite blonde with her handiwork around the house and yard. But it wouldn't be fair to Felicity to stir up anymore trouble, even something as small as her still somewhat new boyfriend's jealousy, after everything else that'd happened lately.

*Swing... THUD!*

And after John had slept on it some more he'd probably still want to ask her why exactly she had all the supplies necessary to repair broken down doors or windows in the crawl space under her living room floor.

She had extra windows *and* doors down there, after all, not just the supplies to patch them up. The only reason he'd gone with just patching it up instead of replacing the door and frame was because the sturdy door and double locks hadn't been broken at all. Just the doorframe. So fixing and reinforcing that seemed like the more secure option than just replacing the frame itself.

*Swing... THUD!*

John knew that all those supplies she had on hand for the repair—for just about any repairs, probably—would continue to bother him until he asked her about it.

Just like the home security system she didn't seem to turn on: a system that wouldn't be out of place at Queen Mansion or somewhere similar, just on a smaller scale. And off. Another thing he'd want to talk to her about, since he hadn't wanted to push on anything really last night, but no alarm system could work at all if it was off.

*Swing... THUD!*

This time, when Oliver swung down, he released his grip and dropped an effortless landing on the hard cement floor from a few rungs higher up than most people—*normal* people, anyway—would be comfortable with. "She didn't even look at it," he shook his head, clearly thinking back on his own observations of his girlfriend for this morning instead of last night.

"She say anything 'bout last night?" John asked him, doubting it but half hoping she might've been willing to talk about it over morning coffee even though she hadn't over cocoa before bed.
"Nope," the vigilante grimaced, shaking his head again. "She seemed more worried about her meeting with my mom this morning," he finished with a sigh.

The former soldier snorted again, "Well, that I can understand," he shook his head when the younger man looked at him. "She does know that your mom shot you a few months ago."

Oliver actually rolled his eyes, "She wasn't worried about that," he sighed. "It was more like she was worried about making a good impression. On my mom, I mean."

John paused, considering that for a moment, then sighed. "Most people worry about those things, Oliver."

Most people also experienced some variation of a panic attack, or at least showed some sign—or signs—of shock after meeting a murderer and being forced to work for them at gunpoint. Or, in this case: crossbow-point. But at least their I.T expert met one of those two norms...

John looked back at the other man then, surprised he hadn't responded already, and frowned as he saw the thoughtful—worried—expression he was wearing. "What's wrong?"

Oliver blinked, but then shook his head and met his eyes again. "Did..." he trailed off, looking away again for the time it took him to swallow, but steeling himself then and locking eyes again. "Did Helena hurt her?"

John blinked himself, then scowled. "Not as far as I know. Why? What'd she say—"

"Felicity didn't say anything," Oliver interrupted, turning away, this time walking over towards the wrack his bow and a bunch of arrows were displayed on.

The bodyguard watched as the archer strapped on the full quiver that was always restocked before it was hung up, then the bow, before turning towards the side of the room reserved for bouncing balls being shot into the cement wall.

Oliver kicked over one of the baskets waiting to be upturned for this, backing away and to watch the tennis balls bounce a few times at random before he finally drew an arrow and started shooting
them off with a speed and ease that'd probably always be at least a little bit scary.

_Thwip—pow!_

"She was favoring her shoulder."

_Thwip—pow!_

"This morning," the archer added to be clear. "When she got into the car."

"Hadn't noticed," John admitted with a grimace, frowning as he tried to think back on last night.

At the same time reminding himself that Oliver only made archery _look_ easy, and it wasn't something he had the time to try learning. There were already enough archers running around Starling City as it was. And any of the numerous guns he already had under his belt were all a lot more normal, and much less likely to stand out, then someone _else_ shooting arrows would.

_Thwip—pow!_

"She was careful when she was putting some dishes away, too," Oliver added again, drawing back and releasing smoothly even as his own words were making him scowl some more.

_Thwip—pow!_

John blinked at that. "Actually, yeah," he nodded slowly. "When she made hot cocoa—"

_Thwip—pow!_

"—she shied away from lifting the pot," he remembered, shaking his head. "And it wasn't even that big."
No, it was just big enough for the exact amount of hot cocoa she'd stirred up in it.

*Thwip—pow!*

The archer grimaced. "Her shoulder looked fine at the opening."

*Thwip—pow!*

"I couldn't even make out the scar."

*Thwip—pow!*

"I thought she looked all healed up, too," John admitted, grimacing even before he finished. "But the Huntress might've done something."

*Thwip—pow!*

*Thwip—pow!*

"Even healed," the soldier went on steadily as the arrows flew faster. "The same hold she used on Merlyn down here would've hurt Felicity, too."

The archer's scowl deepened at that and the arrows were flying even faster.

*Thwip—pow!*

*Thwip—pow!*

*Thwip—pow!*

"And you know that's not the only hand-to-hand that woman knows," John pointed out unnecessarily.
The brunette had held her own against her father's men, taken on Triad soldiers and even tried her best against the vigilante before. That Oliver had definitely been holding back didn't devalue the proof that the Huntress did have some martial arts skills to speak of. Unfortunately.

"But she didn't tell you anything either?" Oliver checked, needing to know enough to make himself unclench his jaw to ask as he kept executing tennis balls.

"No." John shook his head. "She didn't." He wondered if the archer was imagining aiming the arrow he'd supposedly intended to shoot last night, but didn't ask. Not sure if hearing confirmation would matter, and knowing letting Oliver think about it enough to manage a 'no' would definitely matter.

Instead, John refocused. "Seems sharing's not really Felicity's strong-suit either," the former solider commented, crossing his arms. "Common ground for you two?"

As soon as the last bouncing ball was stuck to the cement wall with an arrow through its center, the archer turned back to scowl at him.

"I'm just saying..." John said, holding his hands up in surrender even though the training vigilante was all out of arrows.
"Yeah, that's true," John agreed, frowning slightly as he made himself really consider that for a few moments. Still thinking about it as he went over to the makeshift workstation where the archer made and sharpened his arrows. He grabbed one of the empty bins there and headed for the cement wall riddled with arrows, tennis balls, and who knows how many holes from previous impacts. "'Bout a month and a half since she found out about you," he gestured more towards the arrows and bow than the man he was talking to, then shrugged. "Pretty sure she had some idea before that."

"Yeah," Oliver sighed, still studying the perfect arrows as his friend started pulling the used ones from the wall.

John knew from experience that the archer wouldn't appreciate the help making the arrows, checking them over or loading the quiver. That for Oliver it was clearly a point of pride that he made each and every one of the arrows he shot, and for his own peace of mind he had to make sure they were perfect before he might ever need them and find out they weren't.

Well, that and the former soldier couldn't really see the difference between some of the used arrows and the ones that weren't. Even he could see that the impact with a wall meant at least the arrowheads would need to be replaced, but the rest of the arrow? Plenty of the points weren't pointy anymore after going through a ball and into a wall, but what did he really know about arrows?

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

The army had made him a master of guns and not half-bad with knives, but bows and arrows weren't something they'd probably ever covered; since some version of firearm had been around longer than the United States of America. So, instead, John worked the part of the process he could make sense of: pulling a now possibly not razor-sharp arrow out of the cement wall, yanking the tennis ball off and tossing the ball in the nearby trashcan before dropping the arrow in the bin to be sharpened later.

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

And repeating it for each arrow in the wall, while Oliver continued reloading his quiver. The only sounds for several long moments being the barely perceptible ones from the arrows and the tennis balls they'd shot through.
"She knew." Oliver finally said into the silence, eyes still studying his arrows as he worked it through out loud. "I couldn't make myself come up with a convincing lie for her. Not really," he smiled slightly, shaking his head as he approved another arrow and into the quiver it went. "I tried to think of better ones at first, but they probably wouldn't have fooled her."

"Probably not," John easily agreed.

Felicity Smoak was without a doubt one of the brightest people he'd ever met, after all. And he'd known before her outburst at their vigilante last night that she saw a much broader world-view than the archer. Probably a lot more broad scope than John himself did, too.

No, the former Special Forces soldier wasn't sure he completely agreed with her on whether or not the archer had done that bad a job of covering his tracks so far. Not when she had said barely a week ago that, according to the S.C.P.D's internal records, at least, they weren't even looking at Oliver Queen as a possibility anymore. For the moment, anyway.

But the bodyguard could understand what she was talking about there, too.

'For the moment' didn't mean 'forever.' It didn't mean that the Hood rescuing the Huntress—whom Detective Lance knew Oliver had briefly dated back between when she almost shot his mother and then caused her father's complete fall from power—wouldn't make the man remember the connection.

A connection that could, in theory, bring all too many of the things about Oliver Queen together into something that made a dangerous amount of sense.
John could well remember the first few weeks with none of those pieces he knew fitting together as he tried to play bodyguard to an escape artist. He could also remember when everything came together and became so startling clear.

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

What'd be worse though, was if any detective other than Lance remembered the connections and started making more. Because the very personal attack Oliver had orchestrated against his ex's father—using said ex to make sure it worked—had been effective. At the very least, it'd made the still mourning father doubt his own judgment when it came to the younger man he had every reason to hate.

Whether Laurel had—somehow—managed to forgive Oliver for cheating on her and inadvertently causing her sister's death, Lance's younger daughter was still dead. So John could easily understand his hatred for the former playboy, especially months ago when his cover-image was the idea that he hadn't changed at all as a result of the disaster. When they way Oliver acted would've made it seem like he thought nothing that'd happened—Sara Lance's death include—was worth trying to change at all.

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

But if another detective, one with no personal bias towards Oliver Queen, made the same connections they wouldn't be nearly so inclined to not trust their gut.

So the Hood rescuing the Huntress would've been a very bad idea.

What exactly the other archer breaking the madwoman out would do, however, John had no idea...

*Thwop. Clatter... bom.*

Then again, the ex-soldier frowned. "Do you think she might be working with the other archer now?"
Oliver froze for a barely perceptible fraction of a second, before he aimed a frown at him again.
"What?"

"The Huntress," John shrugged off the glare and kept on going. Remembering some of the wild ideas that'd flown through his head last night that, after some more thought, now didn't seem so wild. "The other archer attacked the S.C.P.D and broke her out."

"Then he let her go," Oliver's frown deepened more thoughtfully. "That doesn't make sense."

"No, it doesn't," John agreed, watching the other man think for a moment, but turning back to disassembling the odd art wall when the archer went back to studying his arrows one by one.

"I thought he might've let her go to follow her," the vigilante said, thinking it through. "That he'd wanted her to lead him here. Or, well, to me, anyway."

"Yeah," John nodded, that was a suspicion that'd crossed his mind, too. That was why he'd been on the nearby rooftop with a sniper rifle after all. Well, one of the why's anyway.

"Do you think—"

"Bam! Bam! BAM!"

Both men stiffened as the sound of someone knocking—or a palm slamming—on the hard metal door upstairs clanged through that thick metal and echoed down into the basement.
Oliver reached the computers first, and relaxed with a semi-aggravated sigh even before his bodyguard had gotten there to see Tommy Merlyn literally waiving at the security camera that covered the other side of the door up in the club.

Exasperating, but he really was the better of the two people who could be trying to bang their way in down here. The bitch that'd attack Felicity last night would have to be a fool to come back here, but she would've had to knock, too. Since Felicity had already changed the password, and unlike Oliver's earlier choice it wasn't one anyone would be able to guess.

*Bam! Bam! BAM!*

John just barely kept himself from jumping as the sound echoed around them, and asked, "Want me to let him in?" he asked, wondering if the man wasn't afraid of hurting his healthy hand.

"No," Oliver sighed, and when he looked back at him he saw the man had opened up another part of the Foundry's security programs.

A few key clicks later, the door was unlocked just in time for Tommy to try it again. Archer and soldier both turned to watch him close the door behind him and come down the stairs.

"Oh good, you are here," Tommy shook his head. "Wasn't sure."

John rolled his eyes. "Bringing attention to that door wasn't the best way to find out."

"Well, it's not like I know the password, is it?" the younger man replied, shrugging as he reached the bottom of the steps. "And it's nine o'clock in the morning. Even the cleaning crew's not here yet."

Oliver snorted, amused despite himself. "What'd you want, Tommy?"

His friend probably hadn't been up as late as the rest of them were, but he was still down here just a handful of hours ago, too. And like he said, no one had to be at *Verdant* for hours. Even after the cleaning crew finished up sometime this morning, with no deliveries expected before tomorrow, there was no reason for the rest of the staff to be here more than a few hours before opening. Let alone the general manager, even though he'd definitely taken the roll more seriously than Oliver ever could have.
Tommy hesitated a moment, then he walked over to Felicity's empty computer chair and sat down. "Didn't see anything about the Huntress being arrested again on the news. Did she..." he trailed off uncertainly.

"No. She didn't," Oliver sighed. "She disappeared. Hiding somewhere."

Tommy hesitated again, even more visibly considering what he should ask next, and the archer answered before he could put the words together.

"Oh..." Tommy couldn't completely control his facial expression for a moment in response to that; clearly torn between not liking that the woman who'd turned him into a breakable bargaining chip was still out there and, the other side of him that didn't like that his friend sometimes killed people.

The ex-soldier could commiserate with that inner struggle. Before he'd accepted that someone needed to fight to save their city, he'd called the vigilante a murderer, too.

Unlike Tommy Merlyn, however, John was a battle-hardened, war-weary soldier. He'd already known that sometimes killing was the only solution, no matter how much you might want another one. And he hadn't grown up with the wealthy scion that a not-so-deserted island had turned into a true killing machine. So for him it was really just a matter of weighing the variables; reevaluating the lines and definitions inside his own mind. Moving and tweaking: not breaking and making.

Then the Huntress had used Tommy as leverage. Hurting and using him, but also indirectly proving that the man his childhood friend had become did still care about him.

Something John Diggle was still interested in watching play out, for Oliver's sake more than anything else.

"So-uh," Tommy grimaced, "Where—"

"Don't know," Oliver cut him off, heading back over to loading his quiver as the other men watched. "Like I said, she disappeared last night. She wasn't at the meeting point she'd picked."

Tommy blinked, brow furrowing in confusion. "What, so she just gave up?" he asked doubtfully.
"Nope, it was diversion," John put in then, leaning back against a nearby table and crossing his arms. "She tried to make Felicity hack the F.B.I for her—"

"Wait, what?" Tommy's frown turned into a scowl.

"She tried to make Felicity hack the F.B.I to find out where her father was," the vigilante explained, the scowl he was directing at the arrow that was currently up for inspection a lot more fearsome than his friend's. Though that could partially be because he wasn't at all intimidated by the bodyguard's crossed arms, having once compared them to bowling balls or not.

"Is she okay?" the cut-off billionaire demanded, and none of them needed to ask which 'she' he was actually worried about.

"Felicity said she's fine," the bodyguard replied, softening slightly at the show of shared concern, but not wanting to go into what they'd been worrying about before he got here.

Tommy Merlyn might be Oliver's friend, but he hadn't really proven himself in John Diggle's book yet, so he wouldn't be talking to him about Felicity's secrecy and tendency to hide her injuries from them. He doubted Oliver would either with the way things currently stood, even if they seemed to be getting better.

"The Huntress scared her, but she left after she thought she'd gotten what she wanted."

"Thought she..." Tommy blinked as he made the connection there. "You mean she tricked her somehow?"

"She did," Oliver confirmed, his scowl dimming a little with understandable pride. "Sent her to an empty house, so no one else got hurt," he finished with a sigh.

Tommy blinked between them as he asked, "How?"

Archer and soldier looked at each other at that, then both shrugged as they looked back at the other man.
"You'd have to ask her if you really want to know," John told him.

"Huh..." Tommy nodded slowly, starting to tuck his hands in his pockets thoughtlessly, wincing as his hurt hand protested that too, but forcing himself to shake it off. "But she wasn't there when..."

That brought the archer's glare back right away, though it was still directed at another arrow as he acknowledged, "I followed Helena there; but she was long gone by the time I reached it."

John winced, just knowing that the archer was rebuking himself for heading straight out after the Huntress.

He shouldn't be. Yes, he might've caught the madwoman if he'd given chase right away, but he might not have. And Felicity might've needed him a lot more, even with their mutual friend there.

"Huh. That's-uh-kind of awesome." Tommy's words made a little of the tension leave the room. Not anywhere near as much as their missing team member sometimes could without even seeming to try, but that little bit still helped.

"Yeah," Oliver agreed, not able to relax enough for a smile when they were still talking about last night, but sounding a little warmer all the same. "She is."

Tommy looked down at his still wrapped hand—he'd have to wear the ACE-bandages for at least a few more days. He winced as he made the mistake of trying to move the hurt appendage a bit, but then shook his head. "I'm glad she didn't hurt her," he said, then he frowned. "Wait, if she knows Smoaky can hack for her, won't she—"

"Felicity's at work, and Q.C Security is on alert," John interrupted calmly.

"And she'll be with my mom most of the day," Oliver added. "And her bodyguards." He didn't try to look happy about that either, shaking his head as he added. "I'll pick her up tonight."

John winced again. "You might wanta ask her about that first."
Driving her home last night and into work this morning was one thing. And their genius had protested the treatment immediately after she was attacked. Trying to get her to leave her little car in the garage again wouldn't be easy.

"We can't leave her alone," Oliver shook his head. "We don't know where Helena is now, and she could still come after Felicity," his scowl was back in full-force as he finished, all but glaring at the arrow he was currently studying for imperfections.

This John understood, too. And considering the still unexplained ties Oliver had to the Russian mob, he probable understood the mindset of that sort of criminal a lot better than a former soldier turned bodyguard could.

The world that Helena Bertinelli had been brought up in; that'd made starting a mob war to bring her father down seem like an okay thing to do. Along with shooting up a sidewalk to get one target —though common street thugs sometimes did that. Maybe justifying the deaths of anyone other than their target, or targets—from innocent kids to harmless senior citizens—by telling themselves that anyone willing to walk nearby their enemies didn't deserve any sympathy.

A mindset that the Huntress seemingly shared to some extent. But her unwillingness to face Oliver last night hopefully meant she knew better than to go after Felicity again so soon, even if she was furious with the other woman's trick.

The several seconds of silence that followed were heavy between them, their mutual worry for one woman and anger for the other hanging like summer humidity around them.

Then Tommy spoke up again, "But Smoaky's okay, right?" he asked, frowning at his friend as Oliver hesitated again. "The Huntress didn't hurt her?"

"She said she was fine," the vigilante repeated his bodyguard's earlier words with a sigh.

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "But?"

John hesitated, still not sure about sharing this with someone who he didn't know well enough to completely trust. But Oliver did, so when he sent a frowning nod his way, the bodyguard answered. "We both noticed she was favoring her shoulder last night and this morning." He turned back to finishing the project he'd paused, heading back to the wall for the last arrow still lodged there as he went on. "And it wouldn't be the first time she's hidden an injury from us."
"What?" Tommy asked, sounding so clearly like he was frowning—from equal parts concern and confusion—that the bodyguard didn't even need to look at him to be sure of it as he crouched down to pull out that last arrow. "Why?"

John just shrugged as he yanked the last spent tennis ball free with a grunt.

*Thwop.*

"Not sure," Oliver answered, sighing again as his bodyguard dropped that last arrow in the bin while the archer continued reloading his quiver.

*Clatter... Bom.*

After that last tennis ball had landed in the trash, John picked up the new bin of arrows in need of re-sharpening, carrying it over to the archer's station for that and setting it down again, returning his friend's nod even as he headed for one of the other chairs.

The other semi-reformed playboy looked about as bewildered as he'd ever seen him, like the idea of Felicity having just as many secrets as her arrow-shooting-vigilante-boyfriend shouldn't be possible.

At this point, the John realized it was probably a matter of perspective. Given that he'd only just found out his best friend's biggest secret a week ago, he was probably handling all of this pretty well. About as well as the former soldier himself had, anyway.

"She's said that a few times," Oliver remarked, still studying arrowheads as he did so, but he sounded more thoughtful than angry now.

So he was definitely focusing on Felicity now, not Helena.

"That we all have secrets. That the world's complicated." Oliver sighed, shaking his head. "I thought she was just talking about me."
John smirked slightly, understanding where the archer was coming from but a bit amused by it all the same. And a bit appreciative, because it was a little more proof that no matter what Detective Lance and the rest of the world thought, Oliver Queen had changed for the better. It may've taken countless tragedies to make it happen, but it'd happened: and it still was.

Tommy snorted, "What does all of this," he spread his hands to indicate the basement—and the secret it exemplified—at large. "Have to do with why she wouldn't tell you if she was hurt or not?"

John rolled his eyes and snorted at that. "What'd you tell Laurel about your hand?" he asked, gesturing towards the younger man's obviously wrapped injury. Something he couldn't have hidden from the woman he lived with at all.

The other two men both blinked at him, but Oliver's face turned thoughtful some more while Tommy still looked confused, then slightly defensive.

"That's not—"

"You're hurt. I'm sure she noticed," John shook his head. "What'd you tell her?"

Tommy sighed, scowling and looking away as he answered. "I told her I got in a fight with a blender."

Oliver snorted then, shaking his head as he moved to put the now full quiver back on its own part of the display. "Doubt she took that well."

"No. She didn't." Tommy scowled at him, shaking his head. "What was I supposed to tell her? That your ex-girlfriend attacked me?"

Oliver frowned at him. "She's not my ex-girlfriend." He sent a glare towards his bodyguard when the other man crossed his arms. "She's not." He shook his head. "Felicity's right. We only went on one real date."

"And you slept with her," his bodyguard added, not willing to let the reformed-playboy ignore that when it was part of the problem till now. No matter how accepting Felicity was about that and everything else that didn't directly tie into her secrets and injuries.
The vigilante had found a woman who could take care of herself and tried to turn her into someone he could trust, basically by trusting her. And that was never a good idea. As everything that'd followed had proven.

"And I slept with her," Oliver agreed, rolling his eyes again. "So what?"

John kept his face carefully blank, thinking back on all the hard lessons of boot camp to keep that mask in place. Just because any other reaction at all, even a smile of approval, might make the other man change his mind on this.

"Then why'd you let her do this?" Tommy asked him, raising his hand to show that he'd definitely rewrapped it since last night, and not nearly as neatly as the army-trained bodyguard had. "Why'd you let her get away with hurting your mom? With threatening Thea? And Felicity?"

John found himself pleasantly surprised that the later offenses he listed clearly seemed to matter much more to the cut-off-billionaire than his hand did. But he didn't say anything about that either: not wanting to interrupt when the vigilante seemed to be making some big decisions this morning ever since his friend's unexpected arrival.

"That's not..." Oliver trailed off, shaking his head slowly. "I wanted to help her. I thought..."

"You thought Bertinelli could be saved from herself," John put in when he trailed off again, letting himself cross his arms as he leaned back in the chair. "And you did try, but some people don't want to be saved, man."

"Yeah..." Oliver sighed again, shaking his head slowly.

"Okay, I'm pretty sure I'm missing something here," Tommy spoke up again, then the eyes that'd been shooting back and forth between them curiously focused on his friend again. "But Ollie, how much more are you gonna let her get away with? Even if she didn't hurt Felicity?"

"I'm not 'letting her get away' with anything," Oliver bit back, his scowl returning. "I would've put an arrow in her last night, Tommy. I would have," he shook his head again. "But she's gone. I checked every place I could think of for her last night; no signs she'd been there at all." He gestured towards the array of computers Tommy wouldn't be sitting in front of if their tech genius—their all knowing Oracle—were here now. "And Felicity set her programs up to look for her last night, too."
"Still nothing."

"So...what?" Tommy frowned, looking between them again. "She's laying low now?"

John met the archer's eyes, the same doubtful look he knew was in his own reflecting right back at him.

"That's... not Helena." Oliver admitted as he slid what looked like the last approved arrow into its slot. Then his eyes narrowed as another thought struck. "Maybe the Dark Archer caught her again?"

John shook his own head as the vigilante raised an eyebrow at him again. "Why would he?" he asked, trying to not let his relief at the archer's damsel-in-distress complex still not appearing to show on his face.

"Why'd he rescue her and let her go in the first place?" Oliver shot back, scowling as he stood up and turned away from his finished task. "It doesn't make any sense."

"Well I don't think any of this makes sense," Tommy told them, shrugging when his friend frowned at him. "But maybe that's just me." Then he frowned himself. "But wait, if—uh, Helena, right?—if she knows Felicity can find her father and she's so gung-ho about killing him—"

"That's why he's meeting her for lunch, and when she gets off work," John cut in as that worry circled back around.

Deliberately speaking up before the vigilante could seize onto the idea of just going back to Q.C to shadow her all day. Again. Because Felicity was right, that wasn't something any normal employee could get away with, and her boyfriend shadowing her in his family's company wasn't going to do her any favors she wanted.

Which was why John reminded the vigilante again, "You really should ask her about that last one. Surprising her for lunch it one thing, man, but you know she's not gonna want to leave her car at work again."

Oliver grimaced, but didn't argue. Knowing he was right.
"You said Q.C Security's, um, on alert or something like that?" Tommy asked, looking between bodyguard and billionaire.

"Yeah," John nodded. "They'll have twice the normal number of guards on duty for at least the next week."

"How'd you swing that?" Tommy asked him in clear confusion. "Thought you were just his bodyguard?" he added, jerking his chin at the not-cut-off billionaire.

"Made a few calls this morning," John shrugged, more at the look from the vigilante than his friend. "Wanted to know how the Huntress was able to get in and out without anyone noticing. And when I asked about anything last night they said there was nothing out of the ordinary, so they didn't spot any of it. But Felicity's right; the same camera that was down when your stepfather disappeared is still out of commission. No one's bothered riding maintenance about it because no one with enough authority has cared."

"What'd you mean?" Oliver demanded.

"Josiah Hudson was Head of Security for *Queen Consolidated* going on seven years, before he died in a car accident."

"Felicity thought it had something to do with whatever Walter had him looking into at that warehouse," the vigilante remembered, shaking his head again. "They haven't replaced him yet?"

"Think he was planning on being there a lot longer," John shrugged. "Far as anyone knows he hadn't trained anyone up to take over anytime soon. So the board promoted the guy with the best connections, Matthews, and he's mostly figuring it out as he goes along. But he doesn't have the experience to know when he has to push for something, or enough seniority for anyone to care when he speaks up."

"Aren't those the same thing?" Tommy asked, looking like he meant it.

Oliver snorted. "So what's Matthews figuring out as he goes if he's not even making sure all the cameras work after the C.E.O was kidnapped from the building?"
"Actually, Felicity says that's her fault," the bodyguard told him. "Seems she wanted to make sure you had an easy way in and out, so she keeps the work order at the bottom of maintenance's list."

"Why—"

"Your lies are worse than his," John reminded him, gesturing to the man that was apparently becoming a part of their team now, too.

"Oh, hey," Tommy protested halfheartedly.

"Matthews is too afraid of stepping on anyone's toes to really get anything done," the bodyguard went on. "So he mostly just keeps the security desks staffed and the minimum number of guards on hand. And he's cut hours just about every time payroll's complained. Yeah," John nodded at the incredulous look that earned him from the one of the two that recognized how bad that was. "I told him to go back to Hudson's playbook, with the normal crew doubled till I tell him to drop it again."

"And he just did it 'cause you're Ollie's bodyguard?" Tommy asked skeptically.

"If the bookkeepers were scaring him, you really think Digg wouldn't?" Oliver raised an eyebrow at his friend.

When the former soldier looked at him, Tommy just spread his hands.

Oliver didn't sigh again; his dissatisfied noise sounded more like a drawn out grunt as he got tired of standing around talking and headed for his self-torture apparatus. Barely pausing as he got there, before leaping straight up and seizing onto the bar. He took just a second to adjust his grip, if that, before he started going up again.

_Swing... THUD!_

John just shook his head while Tommy stared.

Looked like the vigilante was done talking right now. But better that than headed out the door to try and watch over his girlfriend without being seen doing so in a building where everyone knew
his face and name.

Swing... THUD!

"What is he doing?" Tommy directed the whispered question at the still seated bodyguard.

But it was Oliver that answered. "Working out."

Swing... THUD!

"Why?" Tommy wanted to know. Probably meaning to say 'why now?' but the look on his face indicated he could imagine ever wanting to do that exercise at all.

John could sympathize, and he'd actually tried it just the once.

Swing... THUD!

"Why not?" Oliver retorted.

Verdant's Manager shook his head. "Well, I mean, we were—"

Swing... THUD!

"—talking?" he finished with another wince.

The man up by the ceiling replied, "We still are."

"Well, yeah, but..."
Tommy winced again, and looked back at the bemused bodyguard. "Does he always do this?"

John shrugged. "Pretty much."

"You get used to it," the former soldier said then, finally taking sympathy on him then. "Not much more we can talk about now." He gestured towards the other training equipment. "I'm probably gonna get started soon, too."

The other, far less dramatically reformed-playboy stared at the makeshift gym equipment like he'd never seen it before. Which couldn't be true, because he was in shape, even though he wasn't a body builder or any kind of fighter.

But he clearly didn't consider the vigilante hideout under the new nightclub the place to come for that... Not yet, anyway, from the looks of it.

"Gotta keep in shape for both our lines of work," John reminded him.

That was enough to make the extreme gymnast pause up above them, swinging to a stop to look down at them. "There's nothing more to talk about, Tommy. Not till we learn something new."

The man now indirectly responsible for covering for all their alibis sighed.

"We can let you when that changes," John volunteered more diplomatically, trying to help the vigilante not undo the strides he'd somehow made on this front so far.

Because the intimidating exercises weren't doing the trick there; unless the trick the man was trying for was just to scare his friend off. Didn't seem like a choice he would've made though; not
consciously.

"Okay..." Tommy agreed slowly. "I'll just, uh, work on the books upstairs then, I guess..."

_Swing... THUD!_

John didn't let himself frown up at his friend or roll his eyes as the man right in front of him winced again.

"Might wanna think 'bout a new story." Oliver suggested.

_Swing... THUD!_

"For Laurel."

Tommy's wince turned into a frown.

_Swing... THUD!_

"She won't let it go."

"No, she won't," the frowning man sighed again. "Any ideas?"

John snorted as he interrupted again. "You don't want any of his."

_Swing... THUD!_

Tommy blinked at him, his frown fading as he looked more confused than frustrated. "Why not?"
"Your story's really nowhere near as bad as some of his," the bodyguard reassured him. And it was telling that the vigilante exercising up above them didn't even try to deny it.

_Swing... THUD!_

"Okay..." Tommy nodded slowly, finally turning back towards the stairs to leave. "You'll let me know if I can, uh, help?"

"Sure," John nodded, standing as the other man started climbing up the steps.

_Swing... THUD!_

"Tommy?" Oliver had come back down to about the same height his friend had made it up the stairs, and he held himself there, swinging slightly, as he nodded to him. "Thanks."

"Sure," the cut-off billionaire nodded back, holding the vigilante's eyes a moment before he climbed the last few steps that'd take him out of the exercising man's line-of-sight and then the remaining ones up to the door into the club.

John shook his head after he'd watched the door close and glanced at Felicity's monitors to confirm the high-end locks had re-engaged. "I'm confused," he said as he looked up at the vigilante, arms crossed again.

_Swing... THUD!_

"'Bout what?" Oliver replied as he started another move.

_Swing... THUD!_

"Do you want him down here, or not?" John just straight out asked him.
Going up and down the salmon ladder clearly required too much energy and exertion to waste some on a frown for long, but the vigilante did frown for a moment anyway. "What'd you mean?"

"He knows now, Oliver," John shook his head. "Nothing short of a brain injury can change that, and I don't think you'd want chance that."

"Of course not," Oliver retorted.

"So?" John pushed again. "Are you trying to scare him away or bring him in?" he asked, waiting patiently while the other man took several more jumps to consider it.

"Tommy's covering for us upstairs," Oliver reminded him.

"That's more than enough."

"Yeah," John nodded. "It is."

Swing... THUD!
"As long as he thinks so, too," the bodyguard added, and he was pretty sure he heard the other man faintly growl in response.

Swing... THUD!

"Don't tell him that," Oliver ordered firmly, stopping to frown down at him.

"Hey, he's not gonna get any ideas from me," John agreed, holding eyes as he started going up again. He watched the younger man thoughtfully for several more moments before he said. "You know, beating yourself up about all of it's not gonna make anything better."

Swing... THUD!

John shook his head. "Yeah, it just scared Tommy off for now, but it's not gonna help us catch the Huntress. And it's definitely not gonna help Felicity at all."

Swing... THUD!

Now it looked like the archer was almost smiling as he replied, though it was harder to tell the higher up he went while looking up himself. "Didn't think it would."

Swing... THUD!

"It's not like we have any idea where Helena might be now, Digg."

Swing... THUD!

"We've already looked everywhere."

"And you said yourself," Oliver grunted after what might've been a harder landing than normal. "She won't go after Felicity at Q.C again."

"Not in broad daylight."

John frowned at that. Oliver said it like he thought his friend had been admitted that even the Huntress wasn't that crazy, which wasn't what he'd meant at all.

As far as he was concerned, Helena Bertinelli probably was that crazy. But she wasn't stupid. Going into Queen Consolidated late at night was one thing; going after Felicity during the day was another thing entirely.

And the bodyguard was willing to bank on the fact that killing her father was important enough to the Huntress to keep her from attacking Felicity out of simple vengeance over being tricked by her. If only because she wouldn't want to get caught before she'd gotten what she wanted, and the vigilante's new girlfriend couldn't pull the man himself out of her pocket.

That, and John hoped that the bitch did actually care about Oliver, if only a little. Moira Queen was caught in the crossfire of a mob hit, not a chosen target herself, and that was months ago. More recently, the Huntress hadn't gone after Oliver's sister when she'd had the easy chance at it. She hadn't hurt Tommy nearly as much as she could have. And she'd run last night...

Swing... THUD!
The bodyguard didn't believe that the Huntress wasn't crazy. He just hoped that she did care for Oliver enough to keep her from killing the people he cared about. And he really hoped, for Felicity's sake, that he wasn't wrong.

Swing... THUD!

"Digg?" the vigilante was definitely frowning at him as he dropped down from the bottom rung to land easily again. "You don't think—"

"No," John cut him off before he could get any farther than that. "Not sure what to think about most of it, but I don't think your ex—sorry, your not-ex—is crazy enough to storm into Q.C when the guards been doubled and the building is full."

Oliver nodded slowly. "But?"

The bodyguard rolled his eyes then. "But you should probably call her about lunch, at least," he suggested, raising one eyebrow. "And mention driving her home tonight if—"

"I'll do that," the billionaire cut him off with another nod, then glanced at the clock on the wall and grimaced. "Not right now though." He shook his head. "Don't think Felicity or my Mom'd be happy if I called only twenty minutes into their first business meeting."

"Maybe you have some common sense in there after all."

Chapter End Notes

Well, there's another scene.
I know it's not the meeting everyone was looking forward to, but I'd initially planned that from Felicity's POV so it wasn't set to immediately follow her chat with Nyssa.
Now I'm rewriting it to be from Moira's POV, as several readers brilliantly suggested, so it could've been next, but I still thought this fit, too.
Not much forward momentum for the plot, of course, but all the boys are getting along a little better right?
Now as long as none of my muses kidnap the next scene for something else, it should be the meeting though, so you shouldn't have to wait too much longer. I think, anyway. My muses have mostly calmed down when it comes to this story. All their craziness is currently focused on later parts of the series.
All the same, comments, suggestions, ideas, thoughts, etc. are always appreciated!
Thank you for reading, and more to come soon!
~ Jess
Meeting Moira

Chapter Notes

Once again I find myself apologizing for keeping you guys hanging so long: Sorry, sorry, sorry. :-(
I can't really say why this scene was so difficult for me. I started off really loving the idea of it, but by the time I'd finally managed to iron it all out (and multiple edits, rewrites, etc) I'd become very, very bored with it. Hopefully you guys like it a lot more than me. At the very least, you only HAVE to read it once. Or not, I guess. I really don't get it. Moira's point of view should be completely fascinating, but... *shrugs* Maybe I'll get a better handle on it in the later stories/episodes where we see her more again. I can't really say I think I did her justice here, which is disappointing. But maybe I've just read it too many times at this point. *fingers crossed*
Again, sorry for the wait. Hope you can say it was worth it in the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moira Queen's P.O.V.

Moira made her eyes move on from the area of her home city where all of Malcolm's rage and vengeful plans were aimed. The Glades. A name she'd never truly understood, but never cared enough about to make inquiries into either.

From so high up above it all, most of Starling City looked a lot like every other part. Not entirely uniform, and each piece had its own recognizable features, of course, but they were all recognizably part of the whole that'd come together piece by piece through their shared history. A nearly complete, ever-developing puzzle that Malcolm was determined to shatter just to remove the pieces he deemed undesirable.

That something had to be done had been undeniable for more years than Moira cared to count. But somehow absolute, pitiless destruction didn't seem like an answer any sane mind should land upon. No sane mind, however, could expect to reason with a madman.

Still, from high up in Queen Consolidated's tower, The Glades looked a lot like the rest of Starling City. The buildings there weren't skyscrapers, of course. And there were many more rundown, abandoned buildings there than any city should have. Thanks to Malcolm there was just as many more that should be abandoned.

From high up in the sky, Moira could see some of those broken buildings that needed to be torn
down and replaced, but that was all. So high up, it'd be hard to make out the people that looked no larger than ants from afar. Though she knew they were there. And she knew that they weren't ants. They were people with loved ones, just like her.

In too many of those broken buildings, desperate people were probably still trying to make their way in the world. Surrounded by so many others that were also desperate and struggling, it wasn't surprising that at least some of them turned to crime. No matter how much Malcolm insisted upon it, Moira couldn't believe all of them were criminals, but some of them were. Desperation, and the desire to protect the people you loved, could make anyone do just about anything. She knew that.

She also knew that there were innocent people there. Innocent people that were hurt. And innocent people that were even killed for no reason at all. Like Rebecca. In the wrong place at the wrong time because she cared too much for others and didn't take enough care with her own well being.

Not that Malcolm would talk about that. Or about any of the other innocents that'd soon die because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, too. It was undoubtedly easier for him to pretend that only criminals stayed there, and that their victims only visited.

Rebecca Merlyn had been a very good friend of Moira's. Not just because they grew up in the same circles, attending the same schools and going on to raise their families alongside each other. They'd been friends until the day she'd died. So Moira could be entirely certain that Becca would hate what her husband had become. What he was planning to do. Whether it really was to 'save their city' as he claimed, or simply revenge. It wasn't something Tommy's mother could've ever comprehended, anymore than Moira herself could.

But Moira had already tried that road. Tried pointing out to Malcolm that death and destruction weren't things his long dead wife would've wished on anyone. It hadn't worked. Just like trying to work around him hadn't worked for Robert. Had gotten him killed, and nearly taken Oliver with him. There truly was no reasoning with a madman.

Even working with him—however reluctantly—had hurt her family. Agreeing to let Walter be taken away from her had been the hardest thing she'd ever done, but it was better than losing him. Then becoming a widow again.

And her children. She couldn't lose them. She'd already lost Oliver once, she wouldn't survive losing him again. She couldn't.

So Moira had to make herself try to trust a man she knew was mad, because trusting him enough to work with him—and his mad scheme—was the only way her family might survive his madness.
That it also mean who knows how many deaths was something she'd simply have to stomach...

Some of the dead would be criminals, yes. But there'd be so many more innocent people than Malcolm would ever be able to recognize...

For her family, however, she had to endure it.

"Missus Queen?" her assistant's polite voice forced her from her early morning melancholy, or at least it was enough to make Moira shake the thoughts off herself.

"Yes, Cynthia?"

"Your nine o'clock, Doctor Smoak, is here."

Moria glanced at the clock, smiling slightly when she saw the time. "She's early."

"Yes, ma'am."

Moira nodded. "And H.R should be sending up..."

"Amita Bandha at nine-thirty, yes, ma'am. Would you like her here sooner?" Cynthia queried.

"No, I don't think so," the acting-C.E.O answered as she walked around her desk, finding a small relief in the simple, predictable niceties. Polite adherence to routine and the like was, after her children, one of the few reprieves available to her these days. "Please, show Doctor Smoak in."

"Yes, ma'am." Cynthia agreed, and Moira didn't bother to watch her follow through on the other side of the glass wall.

That wasn't why the clear wall was there, for Moira or for Walter. They both knew that they could trust the woman to complete her job efficiently and well. The woman that'd been Walter's assistant
for years had been of invaluable help since Moira had started trying to fill her second husband’s shoes as well as she could. Cynthia had moved up with Walter from Finance when he’d been promoted from C.F.O to C.E.O, and she’d wasted no time in helping his wife however she could. Moira was both the widow of the company’s founder and the wife of its missing current C.E.O, so she’d known a great deal about her family’s company before she’d agreed to take the position of Acting-C.E.O, but she would have had a much harder time learning the ins and outs of it all without the other woman's help. Something she didn't need to remind herself to be grateful for, despite Malcolm showing up to meet with her almost as soon as she'd taken over.

The blonde that Cynthia led back into the office a moment later was wearing business attire instead of evening wear, just as Moira herself and presumably every other woman in the building was. Her outfit was a bit brighter than Moira would ever picked for herself, but it suited what she’d seen of the vibrant personality that'd made her son smile more than once the night before last. She was also wearing glasses; obviously she’d worn contacts to the nightclub's opening.

"Doctor Smoak," Moira held out her hand with a polished smile as the E.A held the door open for her. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Missus Queen," the other blonde replied evenly, catching her hand in a firm handshake without any hesitation as she looked her straight in the eye. Apparently no more nervous in the C.E.O's office than she'd been at Oliver's club.

It reminded Moira of Laurel, which wasn't surprising since Detective Lance's elder daughter was the first woman her son had ever shown any particular interest in. He'd taken her to both of their high school proms, and continued to date her, on and off, until he'd foolishly taken her sister off on The Queen's Gambit's fateful, final voyage. Where Oliver and nearly died with his father and the younger Miss Lance. His mother had more than half expected her son would try to win Laurel back anyway, after he was brought back to her, but not now.

Now she hoped he really was moving on. Laurel was with Tommy and they appeared to be happy together from what Moira had seen of them. And it would be better to see her son in a happy, healthy relationship than falling back into more of his old habits. Habits that, without Laurel available to reel him back at all, could have the potential to become so much worse...

Moira didn't let those thoughts show however, as she indicated the nearby sitting area. "Please," she told the other blonde, gesturing to the seating area, claiming one of the seats for herself while the other blonde perched on the couch.

"May I get you something to drink?" Cynthia offered as soon as they were both seated.
"Yes. A glass of water, please," Felicity replied with a smile.

"The same, thank you, Cynthia." Moira nodded, and the E.A immediately headed into the main meeting room, because the small bar there was closer and better stocked than the break room that all of the executive assistants were permitted to use down the hall. "I understand you had a rather late night?" she asked, because it was as good a way to open as any, considering the number of hours the other woman was working was ridiculous.

Occasional late nights or particularly early mornings were one thing, but Felicity Smoak had been working an average of fifty hours a week, sometimes much more, for months now. And Moira knew that was on top of helping Oliver and Tommy with all the computer-work getting ready for Verdant's opening night. An unofficial, secondary job that she didn't doubt had amounted to a considerable number of extra hours, especially considering how often Oliver seemed to be there. Though his mother suspected he went there to escape sometimes, too, something that would likely happen even more often now that the club was up and running...

"Yes," Felicity nodded, not seeming surprised by the query at all. "I was finishing some coding for the server."

"I see," Moira nodded, studying her intently as her assistant came back in with their waters and set each of their glasses on the table. "Thank you, Cynthia. That will be all." She took a sip of her own water, watching her son's girlfriend do the same as the E.A left and close the glass door behind her.

Moira had never been able to decide on whether she liked the glass walls or not after Walter had them installed, and even after a few months in the relatively unchanged room she couldn't say for certain. Yes, they looked quite modern and they ensured she wasn't surprised by anything from outside the office more often than not, but even though the executive floor saw very little real traffic, she still felt a bit like a goldfish in an aquarium some of the time. An all too easily broken aquarium she'd learned not too long ago. Moira shook that thought away and made herself focus on her guest. "And was that why you were here so early, as well?"

That the Acting-C.E.O only knew about also thanks to Cynthia and simple luck. The E.A had pulled Felicity's file—including her time-log for last week—this morning. But while Cynthia didn't work late into the night, she was typically here in the early morning getting ready for the day. Moira didn't require her to be here before well eight, of course, and Walter hadn't either, but she claimed to prefer being in closer to seven to sort through what was coming later in the day while it was still quiet. And she'd happened to pull into the Q.C garage just in time to see Oliver getting back into one of the Queen town cars while Felicity headed for the elevators, a fact she'd informed Moira of when she'd offered the requested files to her as well.

Given how much time the young woman clearly put into her work, Moira had to wonder how her
son—what with his determination to continue shirking all responsibilities as he attempted to return to some semblance of his old partying ways—had even managed to meet the girl. But they had met somehow, and at Verdant's opening, Moira had seen more real smiles on Oliver's face than she had in a very long time.

"No, I..." Felicity hesitated, and her cheeks reddened just enough to be noticeable as she looked down for a moment, then back up with a sigh. "Actually, I had a bit of a mishap last night. I fell asleep for a moment, and, well, several things on my desk didn't survive it. I went home to rest, but I wanted to clean it up—"

"Doctor—"

"Please, call me Felicity," the girl reminded her.

"Felicity," Moira nodded, giving her a warm and hopefully reassuring smile in return. "Accidents happen. We have cleaning staff for that. That said, I don't want to hear of you keeping such hours again. Certainly not regularly." She shook her head. "While crises happen, just as accidents do, I know of nothing so important at present that it couldn't wait for normal business hours."

The curious mother wanted to ask how often Oliver was around Queen Consolidated, even if was just to give his girlfriend a ride. Then again, the young woman had been working so many hours lately, combined with whatever work Oliver and Tommy must have been putting into their nightclub to make sure it was ready for its grand opening. Perhaps those commutes and some breaks at work was where the pair had seen the most of each other recently. A happenstance that Moira was no stranger to herself, but not one she would've expected her son capable of accepting after he'd publically forced her to let him stay out of their family's company several months ago. The surprise was heartening, however, as it meant her son had in fact matured far more than he wanted her to think. As heartening as the easy smiles she'd been even more surprised by when her son had introduced his new girlfriend not long ago.

Still, it was clear from Felicity Smoak's personnel file that all the hours she was working here had to do with the I.T Department putting far too much of a workload on her in general. Not that Moira had had the time to closely review every aspects of the rather long file, but the quick notes Cynthia had made for her—and the ones Walter had made before he was taken away—sketched a clear enough picture. The printout Cynthia had handed her summarizing the technology expert's recent work-log, along with the summaries of other employees in the same department, had made it all the clearer. Especially since not even any of the supervisors came even close by comparison. None of them.

Truthfully, it was a picture Moira did not like at all. But at least it was a problem that was within her power to fix to her satisfaction. Something that seemed impossible for so many other dilemmas
"Of course, ma'am," Felicity agreed, not appearing to be surprised by the command.

That actually made Moira feel worse about her situation. She might not be able to find a way out of the Greek Tragedy that Malcolm Merlyn had made of her life in general, but surely she should've been able to take care of Queen Consolidated's employees better than this. Walter, she knew, wouldn't have let the situation in the I.T Department go on for so long, but if Felicity hadn't been brave enough to mention her work situation the night before last, the Acting-C.E.O couldn't be entirely sure she would have looked into it even after they'd met. Forcing herself not to focus on that either wasn't impossible, however; she'd hidden her feelings of that nature all her life, and Malcolm's Undertaking was far worse by comparison...

"That being said, my assistant did tell me that several departments have already offered some positive feedback on the latest server update," Moira told her with another nod and an approving smile.

That the girl had had the foresight—if perhaps not the actual authority—to make such improvements shortly before their meeting might go a long way towards making what Moira had planned easier for most of Queen Consolidated to accept. Though the major changes, of course, were what Walter had apparently already had planned for her. What would have gone into affect months ago, had he been free to oversee it.

"For that I must congratulate you." Moira made herself go on evenly, "Excellent work." She knew she should have settled on a clearer plan before this meeting, especially with it being a project Walter had unwillingly left undone. But she didn't want to put it off to figure it all out, either, so she was left to find her way as she went. Making it fortunate that the young genius seemed so readily accommodating.

"Thank you, ma'am," Felicity returned, her smile shy and her eyes going quickly to the coffee table as her hand sought out her water glass again.

Moira followed her example and took a sip herself, before going on as she set the glass back down. "Now, I understand that the I.T Department has become somewhat backlogged since your promotion, so I have instructed H.R to hire a few more technology experts. I'm told it shouldn't take long, as we receive many applications throughout the year."

"They'll still have to be trained," Felicity pointed out quietly, clearly not wanting to risk offending her but also too smart to let that point pass by unmade, which the acting-C.E.O appreciated.
"Of course they will," Moira nodded. "But the department will handle that. While you move into your new office."

That visibly startled the younger blonde: she blinked several times before she shook her head. "I have an office," she protested hesitantly, though more words tumbled out quickly. "A new one. To me, I mean. I just moved there."

"To a desk in the server room, I know," Moira shook her head. Truthfully she didn't have any idea what Walter was thinking when he did that as a starting step. "But that was still part of the IT Department itself and, I think, where all of our problems started. So I've had H.R better outline your position to avoid confusion." She picked up the folder that'd been left unaddressed on the table till then and held it out to her.

Felicity accepted the packet with even clearer hesitation, but after a nod she opened it and read through the summary on top. Her manicure stood out even more vibrantly than the rest of her flattering, bright outfit. The perfect condition of that emerald coat on each nail a clear indication of how recently it'd been applied, despite the fact that it clashed when compared to her outfit's coloring. Then again, had her nails been green for the club opening, too?

Moira lifted her water glass to her lips again, watching as the other blonde's eyes darted from side to side behind her glasses as she sped through that paragraph. Not surprised to see those eyes widen almost comically a second later, before her head snapped back up to look at the acting executive.

"Missus Queen, I-I already received a raise," the girl tried to object.

"No," Moira shook her head as she set her glass back down. "You were given two new jobs that Walter intended to turn into one position—but sadly he wasn't able to finish the process." She nodded towards the folder. "Much of that was outlined on his computer, I believe he planned on approaching you with it after a trial period. I'm sure he..." she shook her head and sighed before going on. "I'm sure he would've intervened sooner, were he still here. But apparently he was keeping this particular project to himself," she nodded towards the glass wall they could see her assistant working at her desk through. "Even Cynthia didn't know the details. He mentioned a trial-period for the new position that you were fulfilling, but... well, then he disappeared."

Moira couldn't quite keep her face fixed in calmness or serenity, though that was always the mask she attempted to aim for these days. Almost always. It didn't fit here, however, not when this girl might one day be a full part of her family. Not when she'd seen how much happier her mere presence made Oliver. Not with the hope she'd brought to all of Moira's family as a whole. Not just with the leaps and bounds forward Oliver was making with her, but with his mother and sister, too.
His mother, after all, was no fool.

Then again, she'd half-expected the note Cynthia had flagged a section of the work-log with, detailing different projects the I.T expert had completed for Oliver. Each meeting here at Q.C briefly explained with the barest of summaries: all politely referring any questions regarding the jobs to 'Mister Queen himself.' Not unlike the similar note referring any interested party regarding earlier jobs for 'Mister Steele' to see the C.E.O himself. A level of professionalism and discretion that Moira could appreciate, even if it did leave her curious. And a little worried, when she considered the mess Walter had gotten himself into despite her efforts to intervene. Still, that work had resulted in the glowing reports Moira's missing husband had left, and the promotion that should've been handled better by the company.

Had those reports come from her first husband Moira might've been concerned about another Rochev in her life, but Walter wasn't Robert. And the results with Oliver were so clear now; looking back Moira thought that maybe meeting Miss Smoak was when the hard, broken man her son had come back from the dead as had started to soften again. Soften, heal and love.

So this was a woman Moira Queen wanted to help, even if she could never trust her with what was really going on in this city. No more than she could trust Oliver, Thea, or Walter. For all their sakes some secrets simply had to be kept. It was the only way their family could survive.

So letting some of her pain at Walter's 'disappearance' show came so easily it surprised her. Confidence, certainty and strength were what was expected from the acting-C.E.O. Not fear, regret or doubt. Perhaps she should've played the part of a grieving widow longer, perhaps she shouldn't have soldiered past it as quickly as she'd made herself do. But even if it might seem somewhat suspicious after everything that was to happen, and after Walter was finally returned to them, Moira couldn't let them take the 'acting' off her title anymore than she could accept that Walter was gone when she knew her husband was still out there and would hopefully be returned to her. So she'd held her ground each time the board had hesitantly pushed, refusing to believe Walter was gone so long as she didn't have a body to bury.

"I'm sorry," the girl offered even more quietly than her earlier thanks. The girl who'd won real smiles and actual laughter out of Oliver didn't say anymore than that, but she didn't need to. There wasn't any more she could say to that, after all, and it wouldn't help at all if she tried.

"Thank you," Moira swallowed, then made herself nod firmly and gestured to the documents again. She'd let too much time drag already. "I trust that starting salary is acceptable?"

The computer genius hesitated again, then shook her head slightly. "Missus Queen, I'm sure Mister Steele didn't plan to increase my salary this much. It's more than twice what I made—"
"In your old job, yes," the acting-C.E.O interrupted sternly, forcing the thoughts of family and disasters to the back of her mind once again. Focusing on the present, and attempting to run the company that bore her family's name. "Which we've already established you were quite overqualified for, and it is only fair that you be fully compensated for the unreasonable burden you have been working under these last few months."

"Thank you, but the I.T—"

"I've already informed Stevenson of your promotion," Moira cut her off again, not able to keep her voice quite as warm as she spoke of the man. "He and the rest of his department will make do, I'm sure."

The girl barely blinked at her words or tone, so she clearly recognized that the coolness was not direct at her. Again, surprising, but not unpleasantly. After all, there was no reason to feign any warmth regarding the Felicity's former supervisor at all. Walter's notes regarding the man had been notably lacking in any praise whatsoever, which for him was significant. While Walter was never one to be too effusive with praise, it wasn't like him not to look for the good people, so the complete absence of approval for the man that'd run that Queen Consolidated Information & Technology Department for almost six years now said as much about Blake Stevenson as the long list of virtues throughout the missing C.E.O's review of Felicity Smoak had said about her.

Moira had only met Stevenson a few times herself, and then only at various company functions where the simple exchanges of polite niceties were all that could be expected of either of them. She could recall nothing memorable about him, save for the fact that her son had asked about him at one point. Oliver showing any interest at all in their company was always a surprise, so him asking Walter about the supervisor of the I.T Department was more memorable than the man himself ever was. It may have also been the reason Walter began taking the young computer genius under his wing. He would have been able to figure out whom Oliver went to in the I.T Department just as easily as Moira had, after the fact, and it would be just like him to quietly step in if he felt it was necessary. And if he'd noticed how much more work Doctor Smoak was doing, far more than anyone else in her department, as well as her considerable unused potential...

Well, here was yet another reason to regret what had had to happen to Walter. But at least this was something she could, and would, fix. That Felicity Smoak was dating her son was undoubtedly come up at some point, if not openly at least on the sharp tongues of gossips throughout the company. But a brilliant woman who'd come to the company straight out of M.I.T, with two doctorates and a genius I.Q, should have been promoted long before now, not in the same position she'd applied for almost four years ago. Oliver, of course, might not have the business experience to recognize Stevenson's primary reasons for not putting an employee as brilliant as Felicity forward for promotion, but Moira was at least more experienced than that.
After studying the just as silent girl for several more moments, and being pleasantly again surprised to find herself faced with the same serenity; the calm confidence she expected from herself, Moira smiled again. "The I.T Department will make do, as they must, while we hire however many new technology experts we need, within reason, of course." She indicated the folder Felicity was holding again. "Your new job will entail more than enough work once your team is up and running."

That made the genius blink again. "My... team?"

Moira nodded, knowing the outline on that first page barely covered the broader scope of what Walter had had planned for his protégé, which Oliver's girlfriend had clearly been. "I'd hoped that there might be some specialists already within Queen Consolidated that you might like to bring over. If not, H.R is compiling a list of applicants for your perusal as well. Your assistant will help you go through them. Should she prove satisfactory, you may of course choose to keep them on."

"My assistant?" The younger woman's face wasn't quite blank, and her smile wasn't quite forced either, but it wasn't the same easy smile she'd shared with Oliver or the polished one she'd presented only a few minutes ago either.

"Yes, she should be here shortly," Moira confirmed, not surprised by that blankness.

This was undoubtedly starting to sound like preferential treatment as a result of the simple fact that she was Oliver's girlfriend. And, in fact, it was. In part. Oliver had made it quite clear that he had no interest in being involved in their family's business, so if it was to stay in the family—as more than just their majority ownership—the woman his mother could hope he might one day marry might be the solution there. True, it was more than a little early for such hopes, but she had so little to work with these days...

What's more, Felicity Smoak had without question worked hard the entire time she was at Queen Consolidated without ever receiving much recognition or reward. She had more than earned a promotion at the very least, and if Walter and Oliver both trusted her, Moira could do no less. Even if her husband's trust might imply complications she'd prefer to pretend didn't exist...

Moira went on when the girl only picked up her glass for another sip of water instead of saying something. "As I said, H.R is already compiling appropriate applicants. We also have come up with several proposals for the Systems Administration and Computer Security team. Which as you know, will be part of Computer Sciences & Support, just as the I.T Department itself is, but with a broader focus." She paused, waiting for the other blonde to meet her eyes again before she added, "Considering your thesis, I thought it best to leave any further parameters of its formation up to you."
Felicity nodded slowly, "Within reason, of course."

"Of course," the acting-C.E.O agreed, smiling slightly. "I have, however, asked the Head of Security to meet with you later this morning so that you might discuss any help they might be called upon for Queen Consolidated to best secure itself electronically."

The girl glanced at her water glass again, swallowing slightly, but she didn't pick it up this time. Instead she thought for a moment before she nodded, seizing onto her specialty as a conversation topic even if it was also part of the promotion that'd made her uncomfortable to begin with. "Okay. I-I think that'd be a good idea," she nodded again. "I already added a few more codes to the system and additional firewalls when I updated the server."

"Good," Moira approved warmly. Pleased, but again not surprised as she'd already suspected as much. One of Walter's notes about her, after all, was that Q.C likely owed their not being hacked already to the computer genius sitting with her now. It didn't set them apart from all other companies in this business era, of course, but it was good for the company all the same. The saying "all news is good news" applied better to Hollywood than the business world most of the time.

Felicity hesitated, clearly considering her next words. Then she finally just asked, "Are you sure —"

"Absolutely," Moira interrupted firmly, but still warm. She leaned forward a little so that she could reach across the table and catch the younger woman's hand, patting it gently a few times. "You've more than earned this, Doctor Smoak. Don't let anyone tell you differently."

There would be gossip, there always was. Far too many people were more than willing to take the easiest path life presented for them, after all, and in any workplace that mindset meant that most people found themselves very bored if they didn't seek some sort of distraction. So there would always be gossip, and those who believed the world owed them more than they were willing to work for would always make that gossip mean-spirited. But hopefully the genius in front of her would withstand whatever came her way as well as she had the last several years.

Said genius still looked hesitant, but she nodded slowly.

Moira gave her another smile, before she glanced towards the clock, and then immediately out towards the reception area, where she could see Cynthia chatting politely with another woman. "And that should be your new assistant." She let her hand go and reached for the button of the
intercom. "Cynthia?"

Instead of answering immediately on the intercom, her E.A turned towards the office doors and crossed those few more steps, opening one class door to poke her head in. "Yes, Missus Queen?"

"Would that be Doctor Smoak's new E.A?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Show her in, please." Moira ordered, with a waive that her daughter would probably call imperious, but such things were expected from a Queen. Even Thea, for all her hard partying till a few short months ago, knew that.

"Yes, ma'am." Cynthia agreed, closing the door for just a moment as she turned her head to call the other woman over, before she opened it again and stepped inside as both of the seated woman stood.

The new woman that Human Resources had decided upon was older than Cynthia, though only by a few years. She was of Indian descent, and dressed more sharply than her new boss, but not in a way that would diminish her new boss. The classic, dark-gray skirt-suit over a white-collar blouse was both tasteful and appropriate, but would allow her to fade into the background as needed. Leaving the younger woman she'd be serving to stand-out even more than she already would, which would suit Moira perfectly, assuming they worked well together.

"Missus Queen, Doctor Smoak, this is Amita Bandha," the acting-C.E.O's assistant introduced the new arrival with a polite smile.

"Thank you, Cynthia," Moira said, nodding her dismissal. Turning her professional smile on the new woman as her assistant exited the office and closed the door behind her. "Good morning, Miss Bandha."

"Good morning, ma'am," she nodded back, her smile for both women. "Doctor Smoak."

"Good morning, Miss Bandha," Felicity returned politely, stepping around the table and holding out her hand till the new assistant made the few quick steps to shake it. "It's nice to meet you."
"Thank you. And you as well, ma'am." She returned, folding both her hands around the folders she was carrying once she was free to do so again.

"You will be acting as Doctor Smoak's personal assistant for the foreseeable future. You understand what that position entails, I'm sure?"

"Yes, ma'am," the small woman's words were only just loud enough to reach their ears, and her nod was nearly a bow.

"Good," Moira approved, her own nod not so deep and sharper. "And Cynthia gave you Doctor's Smoak's current schedule and such?" she half-expected the blonde woman to protest at some point, but she seemed to be content watching and listening for now. Perhaps not completely content with the advancement she knew was coming mostly from her current relationship with Oliver, but not causing a scene about it regardless.

"Yes, ma'am," Miss Bandha confirmed again, this time going on politely. "H.R has also compiled several resumes for her perusal—both from within Queen Consolidated's current employees, and a number of new applicants as well."

"Excellent," Moira approved again, before looking her potential future daughter-in-law over again. A little surprised at how readily the young woman was taking all of this in.

Some of the comments in Felicity's employee profile had indicated that though she was a genius her personality and general confidence did not hold up well under too much pressure. Then again, those comments had come from the supervisor that likely didn't want her to be promoted, and seemed at odds with Walter's own notes about her, let alone the C.E.O's decision to promote her. Moira had expected her missing husband's words were likely far closer to the truth, if only because no matter how much Oliver had changed on that island he had never been attracted to wallflowers. All the same it was yet another reason for the next executive review of the I.T Department to be both moved up and conducted with much more scrutiny than such things sometimes were.

But Moira couldn't be displeased by that. Not with what she was seeing today, and certainly not with how many times she'd seen her son smile only a few nights ago. Yes, it was somewhat inconvenient with everything else she already had to worry about—Malcolm Merlyn's all-important, awful Undertaking most of all—but this was about her son. And Moira would do anything for her family.
Both E.A's shifting ever so slightly told the acting C.E.O she'd been silently studying the other blonde for a little too long, though Moira had to watch her for a moment more at that realization. Because while Walter's comments in Miss Smoak's profile were far more glowing than the ones left by his underlings and Oliver obviously thought this girl controlled the sunrise, everything she knew about her had still led Moira to expect some social awkwardness. She wasn't displeased, however, to find her the younger businesswoman rising to the occasion.

"You may be aware that there have been some renovations underway," Moira finally went on, pausing to take another sip of water before. "In the upper levels of the building?" She finished, still meeting the other blonde's steady gaze.

The girl was studying her just as carefully, looking for whatever cues Moira was willing to give her; or perhaps the few that long years in the social spotlight and a childhood spent learning the proper etiquette before that hadn't managed to smooth completely away. After a long second she nodded slowly. "Yes, ma'am. On all the executive levels. Except this one—everything here was completed three years ago, I think?"

"Yes, it was," Moira acknowledged, sparing a long moment to glance around the modernized office with the glass walls that Walter had been so enamored of that his wife hadn't been able to gainsay him.

At the time, she hadn't particularly cared one way or the other. This unshakable feeling of being inside a fish tank whenever anyone walked by wasn't something she would have considered as back then she never would've imagined being the one sitting on regularly on this side of the glass. Now that she was, the ability to make the office more private by turning the glass opaque was invaluable, but not something she could let herself use regularly when her primary reason for being here was to promote confidence.

The kind of confidence she hadn't had since the vigilante had burst through one of the large windows a few months ago with what'd seemed like incredible ease. Yes, the archer would have undoubtedly been able to come in through a smaller window just as easily, but somehow she still couldn't make herself feel even mostly safe surrounded by glass. She deserved the discomfort, however, because all too soon another part of the city would shatter and the vigilante would be proven right. Her pleas for her family may have moved him to mercy despite her having shot him, but he was nonetheless right. Moira was failing this city, and it would only get worse. But for her family's sake she couldn't do anything else.

Miss Bandha shifting ever so slightly forced the acting-C.E.O from her thoughts again. Though, interestingly, the recently promoted genius didn't seem at all uncomfortable simply waiting. And watching...
"As I understand it," Moira made herself go on steadily, focusing on the interesting young woman instead of the glass walls and anything beyond them all around. "The renovations for the twenty-first through twenty-third floors are still in progress. However, they have completed the work on both the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth floors." She nodded as the young woman tilted her head slightly to the side in consideration, watching as she realized exactly which floors she was talking about. "Your team will be based on the twenty-fifth."

That would place her three floors from the top. Higher than Moira would have placed the department if anyone else was going to be in charge of it. Well, anyone other than one of her children, perhaps; but neither of them had shown any interest in the company at all, Oliver had displayed quite the opposite, so moving his love-interest up in the company both figuratively and literally was the best she could do.

It was a change that some of the more vain board members might complain about, but most of them were intelligent enough to connect the dots and watch which way the wind blew at the same time. Actually, most of them would undoubtedly use the excuse of the new department's placement to meet its newly appointed executive, and the acting-C.E.O almost wanted to apologize for that. Though the Legal Department sharing the same level should be able to keep the worst of the vultures from overstaying their welcome.

Instead, Moira nodded to new assistant that was still standing patiently by the door, alone now that her own assistant had returned to the desk outside to keep them from being interrupted. "Miss Bandha, was H.R able to provide the outlines for that?"

"Yes, ma'am," was the E.A's polite confirmation.

"Excellent," Moira smiled again as she looked back at the other blonde, studying her only a moment more before nodding again. "I'm sure you'll have a busy morning, Felicity, but I'd like you to join me for lunch at one o'clock, if that's all right?" she knew that any answer other than 'yes' wasn't really something her query allowed in this setting, and she was pleased again to see that the other woman knew that, too.

The former I.T Specialist's nod was slow, but firm in response. "I'd like that, Missus Queen."

"Wonderful," Moira hoped her smile was more warm than polite, but it was hard to tell these days. She'd been having to make herself smile so often, and since Walter was taken from her it'd just gotten that much harder. "I will see you at one, then," she said as she rose, offering her hand for another professional handshake.
Felicity rose with her, accepting the handshake in the same smooth move. "Thank you, Missus Queen," she said, sounding so sincere that the other blonde felt herself warm just a little in response.

It was clear that she'd more than surprised the young woman. At best, Oliver's new girlfriend had probably expected the acting-C.E.O to be following up on the issues she'd politely raised a few nights ago. At worst, she might be dreading the thought of facing Oliver's mother without him there to act as referee and knight-in-shining-armor.

Moira could only hope that Felicity was as pleasantly surprised as she was herself. Keeping her family happy and moving forward, even while working to destroy the city at Malcolm's command, was far from easy. Every step mattered, just like every secret did.

But this girl made Oliver happy. That was something Moira had seen herself, both in person, and just before that first big date when his nervousness and his sister's teasing had reminded his mother a great deal of when he'd been leaving to pick-up Laurel for their Junior Prom. Laurel was with Tommy now, though, and Oliver was with Felicity. Oliver was far from likely to follow in his father's footsteps now, so Moira had to make the best of this that she could and hope everything worked out well in the end. Even after Malcolm destroyed The Glades and murdered who knows how many people while doing it...

"Missus Queen?" Felicity's voice, just hesitant enough for it to be noticeable, drew the acting-C.E.O out of her worries again.

"My apologies," Moira quickly released her hand, shaking her head. "Not entirely awake yet, I'm afraid." She considered the girl for just a moment more. The formality in front of her new subordinate could potentially help somewhat with the storm of gossip that would soon be brewing. Instead, after a glance at the new assistant, Moira met her new executive's eyes again. "To be clear, Doctor Smoak, your new position is on the executive level. Your team is its own department, which will report to you. And you will report directly to me."

The younger blonde nodded. "I understand that, ma'am. And thank you."

"No, thank you, Felicity," Moira was relieved when the girl didn't ask any more questions, as she was not entirely sure of all the specifics herself yet.

It was possible, of course, that the girl's reticence was born more from her being still somewhat nervous to be meeting with her boyfriend's mother without him. Something that would hopefully change going forward. That, at least, seemed like a small enough thing to hope for when everything
else seemed so impossible.

It also made her speak up again when the girl was halfway to where her new personal assistant was waiting at the door. "Oh, and Felicity?"

"Yes, ma'am?" she replied politely, also turning back to her with a smooth move that somehow reminded Moira of both her son and Malcolm.

A realization that made her blink again, because the pair truly had nothing in common, so she couldn't imagine why she would see it. Something about the smoothness, the grace of the move... but then neither man would ever wear a woman's high heeled shoes. Well, at least not since Tommy and Oliver stopped letting his little sister talk him into playing dress up...

"Outside of meetings with the board; please, call me 'Moira,'" she requested, knowing it might be too much for this first meeting, but hoping it wasn't all the same.

"Thank you, Moira," Felicity agreed with a nod that looked almost a little too deep and a smile that again managed to help Oliver's mother realize why her son seemed to think the girl controlled the sunshine. "Have a good morning."

Moira smiled back, "You as well, dear."

She watched the younger women leave. Continuing to watch as Felicity listened to her assistant while they walked slowly in the direction of the executive elevator, which both of them had access to already because Moira had asked her own assistant to make sure those basic arrangements were already made before this meeting, and Cynthia hadn't failed her yet, so Miss Bandha was undoubtedly already briefed on that. As the assistant selected by H.R to help head up a brand-new, select department, her qualifications were undoubtedly above reproach, so that was one side of the equation she shouldn't have to waste energy worrying about.

It was mere moments till the newly acquainted pair were out of her sight; the glass walls of the C.E.O's aquarium-like office only stretched so far and the newly promoted women were off to head down to the highest of the newly renovated floors.

Leaving Moira to her thoughts. And her smile fell away as she considered the glass walls again. Months ago, Malcolm had been happy to put her in touch with the same company that'd made his own office nearly invulnerable. That'd been more reassuring before another assassin—albeit one
that'd failed, and that she *had* hired and provided the specifications about those windows to—had proven that breaking through that very defense wasn't impossible either. Why the vigilante hadn't come back for her after he'd recovered from her shooting him Moira didn't like to think about. Yes, she had shot him, but she couldn't imagine that would faze a man who went up against games, criminal enterprises and who knows what else whenever it suited him.

If her honest pleas for her family had truly led to him showing her mercy after he'd started appearing around the city again... well, Moira wasn't sure what to think about that either. Not when she not only *had* failed this city, she still was. Which had a lot to do with why she didn't allow herself to be surrounded by bodyguards at all times anymore; she *didn't* deserve it.

Perhaps, paranoia aside, that was why those glass walls seemed to mock her now. That hard illusion of transparency only reminded her of all the horrible secrets she still had to keep. All the secrets she'd always have to keep. Even from those she loved, to keep them safe. Whether they wanted to be kept safe or not...

"Missus Queen?" Cynthia's voice drew her out of her thoughts. Drawing her gaze back to the doors to see the redhead already waiting for her inside them. The E.A had undoubtedly knocked before she'd come back in while the acting-C.E.O was still thinking.

"Yes, Cynthia?" Moira asked, glancing for the time at the clock on the wall near the entrance to the main conference room. "My next appointment isn't for a while now, correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. At ten-thirty," the E.A acknowledged. "Almost an hour from now."

Also confirming that she had cleared everything until then like her employer had asked because Moira had wanted to be available to handle anything that might arise from the newest promotion. But her assistant already knew all that, so it didn't explain the concern she couldn't quite hide.

"What is it?" Moira asked her.

"Mister Merlyn, ma'am? He's requested another meeting," Cynthia answered softly. "He hoped you would be free sometime this afternoon. Shall I move your two o'clock?"

"Did he say why?" Moira frowned, not stopping herself from doing that even though she did fight the urge to sigh. She'd also tried, in the beginning, to hide her ever-growing dislike for every meeting she had to have with Tommy's father. But the helpful woman that'd served Walter just as
faithfully as she now served the woman that'd condoned his kidnapping didn't miss much.

"Something about the UNIDAC project, ma'am?" Cynthia replied uncertainly, because it was one of the only company projects that Moira hadn't had her read in on.

The woman might be cleared to know everything about every contract and project Queen Consolidated had with various branches of the government, but if she learned anything about The Undertaking, Moira couldn't be sure Malcolm wouldn't decide she was a liability somewhere down the line. A liability that, unlike Moira, might not be protected by some small semblance of sentimentality that the rest of his madness seemed to shy away from. Even though it hadn't saved Robert, and it'd barely allowed her to protect Walter. Sharing some secrets didn't lessen their weight, not when the act of sharing them could harm the one they were shared with.

"Very well," Moira did sigh then. "Make it for four o'clock. I believe I'm meeting with some of the scientists from UNIDAC before that?"

"Yes, ma'am. At two-thirty."

"Yes, that should be what he wants to know about," Moira nodded. "Four o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am," Cynthia agreed softly. "I'll call Merlyn Global back to let him know."

There was clear concern in her eyes that Moira would've once appreciated, but there was nothing the other woman could do to help. And no one should want to help, or pity, someone who was planning mass murder. No matter how unwillingly.

"Doctor Smoak and I will be meeting for lunch as well," Moira told her. "Please arrange reservations at Table Salt for us."

There were few people that could call on such short notice to the still relatively new gourmet restaurant and expect to be accommodated. But the Queen family had been Starling City's royalty for a long time, and if that wasn't enough they did always pay well for the privileges that unofficial but long recognized status afforded them.

"Of course, ma'am. For one o'clock?"
Moira nodded, turning to walk back around her desk. "Thank you, Cynthia," she murmured as she sat down. "That will be all for now."

"Very well, ma'am," the redhead murmured.

Moira watched the assistant's reflection out of the corner of her eyes as she collected both half-empty glasses of water on her way out. Then she went back to studying the city she didn't want to destroy.

Just for a few more minutes, because that was all she could allow herself. If she thought too much about any of it her resolve would start to waver again.

She'd already lost one husband and almost lost her son. She couldn't lose Walter, too. Couldn't lose Thea, or lose Oliver again.

The sacrifices she'd already made and was going to continue making to keep them safe might make her feel like a monster, but what other choice did she have?

Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it. Another scene done.
If anyone happens to be interested, I spent literally hours trying to figure how many floors there are supposed to be in Queen Consolidated. As far as I know we're still only told that Olive would have to travel "18 floors down" from the C.E.O's floor to the I.T Department and that's supposedly why he made Felicity his E.A in S2. I finally found an article about the actual buildings that are used for the screenshots in the earlier seasons... in French. A slight pain, since I haven't taken any French classes since I decided to study Spanish instead in junior high, but fortunately Google Translate, while not necessarily grammatically correct, was able to help me figure out what it was talking about with all the pictures that perfectly matched what I was looking for. Thus I found out that one of the three World Trade Center Towers in Brussels are the building we see representing Q.C (as a skyscraper, at least, since they never actually went to Belgium to film anything, they just picked the aerial shots out of some big archive). Ergo, the top floor of Q.C is #28, and the I.T floor is #10. Not particularly impressive when you consider some of the much taller buildings in the world, but in my fanon world, at least, all three towers are Q.C; meaning they have 84 floors all together. But Moira's keeping Felicity in the building that actually has the Q.C logo on it.

Of more interest, undoubtedly, is when I'll finally be wrapping this story up after
keeping you guys waiting so long. I will try to not do so again, but I wasn't trying to end up hating this scene so much in the first place either. A lot of the specifics mentioned herein are relevant to some of the canon divergences I'm making, but even I got a bit bored with them. Hopefully the next few scenes will wrap up easier. Though, I admit, I was seriously tempted to just start posting the next story and maybe coming back to this one later if I felt the need to add more scenes. I may still do that, as the next part of the series is a Methos interlude that still doesn't directly interact with this story or the next one, but we'll see if posting this helps the writer's block I've run into her disintegrate or not.

Comments et al. are ALWAYS appreciated, of course. But I will say (not for the first time, I think) that I have no intention of abandoning this series. I have far too much of it already written for that. Real life, writers blocks, and occasionally the lack of any desire to write (or edit) at all does sometimes get in the way. But once I've started posting a story in this series, I promise that I WILL finish it. Some will just take a little longer than others.

Again, I love to get feedback even if I don't always respond right away. More than one of the longtime readers has managed to give my muses the kick in the a** they sometimes need to keep going. A few of you haven't inspired ideas, and some of you have a lot to do with why I can make that promise about finishing any story I've started posting. So, thank you all very much for your patience and all your help!

One more note, however: It's been even longer since I updated by Jurassic World crossover, so I will be focusing completely on that chapter next. Once I've posted that, I'll come back here.

More to come (hopefully very) soon!

~ Jess S
Chapter Notes

A/N: I am so, so sorry for how ungodly long this update took. I really should know better than to promise an update in another story before I next update the other one. Then I feel obligated to it, and it never seems to work well for my creative process. I think my muses get together to build up the wall of writer's blocks instead of helping break it down. It’s terribly frustrating, and in the end we all suffer. So, to all of you that encouraged me (once again) to just write: you were right, I admit it. Hopefully next time I’ll listen a little better. And to everyone that’s been waiting: I really am very sorry and will strive to do better. Thanks for sticking with me anyway. Enjoy the new scene! :-D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver Queen’s P.O.V.

Oliver had heard the other man coming up behind him; he just hadn’t seen any point in acknowledging him yet.

In both of their idyllic childhoods the closest they came to danger was in movies, rollercoaster or some stupid stunts their still slowly developing brains came up with. The murder of Tommy’s mother had come as a shock—though how could something like that ever not be? But even if that’d stolen some of their innocence and made them a little more wary of the world, it hadn’t taught them real fear for themselves.

Oliver hadn’t learned mortal fear until the Queen’s Gambit blew apart and was swallowed by the sea. Leaving him to drift to Lian Yu, and everything that followed…

Tommy though, he hadn’t ever needed to learn stealth. His idea of moving quietly was practically a parade to the vigilante’s ears. He’d never even needed to sneak in back in their teenage years. It wasn’t like he’d cared if his dad caught him—or both of them—coming home later than they should. Not that Malcolm Merlyn had cared enough to set an actual curfew for his son. Hell, back then, Tommy had probably wanted his old man to just be around enough to catch him: back before he’d had to learn how to make himself not care.

So the vigilante had known his friend was there, he just wasn’t ready to acknowledge it. Somehow studying the one beer he’d allowed himself to open seemed smarter—safer. He didn’t drink often
anymore, but opening up a beer to keep himself from rushing off to rescue Felicity had seemed like a good idea. She’d told him not to rescue her. Told him that she’d didn’t need to be saved from lunch with his mother.

Tommy's voice yanked him from his thoughts. "So?"

Oliver watched him drop into the chair across from him, and couldn’t help but wonder—even hope—that maybe his oldest friend wasn’t willing to give up on their friendship just yet.

"How bad was it?" Tommy prompted when the vigilante only looked at him, making the man blink.

It was the easy camaraderie that threw Oliver more than the question itself. It really was like their friendship from before he’d had to pull back to the Hood in front of his friend. After seeing him downstairs this morning it shouldn’t be such a surprise, but it did surprise the vigilante enough to make him blink a few times. Almost too good to be true. Almost.

Then the actual question made his brow furrow. "How bad was what?" he asked, not even trying to hide his confusion.

Hiding his secrets was what’d hurt his friend the most. There were so many more secrets that he’d never be able to tell though, so he’d have to try to maybe be more circumspect about everything else that he could. Try, and hope that that'd be enough. It wasn’t before, but maybe—just maybe—it would be going forward.

"The phone call you're so glad your bodyguard browbeat you into?" Tommy specified as he twisted the top off the bottle he’d brought over with him without even the slightest though that it could be used as a weapon instead of just a drink. "You know, since you're here, halfway through a beer, instead of meeting Smoaky somewhere for her lunch break? Obviously it didn't go as planned." He paused just long enough for a frown. "Missus Q didn't try to scare her off, right? I mean, I’d think she’d like that you’re dating again. And her nosiness last time we talked didn’t seem disapproving. Well, not that kind of disapproving—"

"No." Oliver snorted, finally interrupting because unlike Felicity, Tommy seemed to get more nervous the longer he babbled: like babbling built it up instead of just letting it out. He took another swig from his own bottle, leading to Tommy doing the same, and only then did he go on. "They're getting to know each other away from work right now, I guess…” he shook his head as he went on. "Felicity didn’t want me to crash. She threatened to lock me out of the basement for at least a week if I tried."
That threat had really surprised Oliver, because it’s been completely unexpected proof that her refusal to be rescue was more than just bravado. Of course he knew the tech genius was completely capable of carrying it out, but why she’d want to…

The only other romantic relationship he’d ever really invested himself in was with Laurel, so she was the only one he had to compare his current girlfriend to. And when she’d been mad at him, her M.O was usually to cut herself off from him—sometimes to outright break-up with him yet again so he had to really put some effort into crawling back to her, but most of the time it was maybe just a week before she expected a nice night out. But his new girlfriend hadn’t seemed to consider anything like that. Then again she hadn’t been angry about any of it, any more than she’d seemed angry about Helena getting anywhere near her last night. She’d been calm and matter-of-fact, so much so he’d half wondered if she was serious at first: and his actually asking that had led to her warning.

In some ways, Felicity might know him better than Laurel ever had. Yeah, some of the tactics Laurel had tried to use to control her playboy boyfriend had worked, some hadn’t. But Oliver wasn’t that boy anymore, so he shouldn’t expect the same things from his new girlfriend. In fact, it should be more of a relief than a surprise. Because it meant that Felicity didn’t think of him that way—that maybe she saw him too much as the determined vigilante to fall for the mask made up of his past self that he sometimes still tried to wear. Not that it was fair of him to compare the two women, anyway, but if there was another way to figure his new girlfriend out he couldn’t think of it. Regardless of how little Felicity Smoak didn’t have in common now, let alone the Felicity of today and the Laurel of five years ago…

But why didn’t Felicity even want to spend time with his mother? It'd taken Laurel years before she was comfortable around Moira Queen without him or at least Thea there, too, and they’d all practically grown up together. The genius had sounded so adamant about not letting him crash though, to rescue her or not…

So, here he was.

Drinking a beer by his not yet opened bar, because neither the salmon ladder or beating on the dummy could distract him from his confusion, and downstairs her at present empty computer desk just served as a reminder of the fact that she wasn’t here and he couldn’t go to her now. Never mind the fact that he only bothered her a few times a week at work, anyway, and that’d been almost all vigilante related.

"Huh. Guess she's not afraid of Missus Q, then," Tommy commented with a smirk that was smaller than it would've been before he’d seen his friend's face under the hood. Smaller, but it still appeared. "That's a good thing, isn't it?"
Oliver blinked at him, but nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess," he agreed, taking another sip of beer.

Then Tommy's small smirk sank suddenly into a deep frown. "Wait, what about—"

"Digg's keeping an eye on the restaurant, and we made sure my mom's full security detail was gonna be with them the whole time." After another swallow, Oliver gestured to his phone on the table. "Still no alerts from Felicity's programs looking for Hel—the Huntress, so...." he shrugged, because there wasn’t any more he could say.

"So no luck finding the crazy ex, either," Tommy stated the obvious. Then he surprised the vigilante anew with a shrug in response to his frown. "Hey, I still think my other name for her fits better, but Smoaky seems to think you trying to help a damsel in distress was a good thing. Even if she turned into a fire-happy dragon bent on burning the city down in the end."

"She's not—"

"Crazy? Yeah, Ollie, she is. Even you’ve gotta see that." Tommy shrugged again. "'Bondage bitch' fits her real well, but 'crazy' anything does, too, so..."

That wasn't the part the archer was confused by, but all things considered, continuing to try and talk to Tommy about Helena didn't seem like a great idea. Oliver would be the first to admit that the Huntress had hurt far too many people in her quest for vengeance against her father, but he also couldn't forget how much she'd been hurt, too. It didn't excuse what she'd done, but it mattered. Still, it wasn't an argument he could win with someone who hadn't been hurt by her and had never had any reason to hurt someone else like that before. Even if Helena hadn't hurt Felicity before she disappeared, she had definitely hurt Tommy. So talking to his friend about any thought of helping the woman—even if it was just to rescue her from the other archer—probably wasn't a great idea, either.

"Gotta say, your new girl's a big improvement," Tommy told him after another sip, almost making Oliver choke on his own. "Smoaky's great."

The archer couldn't deny that, even though some of his thoughts about their relationship—and whether or not she might not be safer far, far away from him—were still circling inside his head. So, after he was sure he wasn't going to start coughing from the beer he hadn't quite managed to send down the wrong way, he answered, "Yeah, she is."
It was something that didn't need to be said. Anyone who'd ever met Felicity Smoak couldn't deny that she was amazing.

Oliver just couldn't help but think he didn't deserve her. He didn't deserve her help with tech, and he definitely didn't deserve to call her his girl. Though he could imagine all too easily what the woman herself would have to say about that...

"How's she doing?"

Oliver found himself blinking again. "What?"

"Smoaky? You know, if she's hiding it," Tommy held up his wrapped hand for comparison, dropping it to rest on the tabletop as he finished. "The crazy chick must not have hurt her too bad, right?"

"I guess," the archer allowed with another grimace. This time he took a few gulps from his bottle, and his friend did the same as he waited for an answer, which could only come out after the bitter liquid had gone down both their throats. "She says she's okay," he finally forced himself to say.

Oliver wasn't able to make his grimace go away as he said it. The more he thought about it—about Helena and Felicity both—the more trouble the vigilante had getting his head around it.

A part of Oliver still wanted to defend the fiery brunette even now, and he probably always would, but Tommy wasn't wrong to say she was more the dragon than the damsel. Vengeance was what drove Helena on every day now, and almost anything that got in her way was expendable. Yes, Frank Bertinelli bore more than a bit of the fault for what his daughter had become, but she had made her own choices, too. She'd threatened Oliver's family, hurt Tommy, and had done one or both to Felicity, too.

And Felicity was brilliant. For all her genius, though, she was also stubborn and foolhardy enough to stand up to him barely a week after she'd found out he was the man under The Hood. He wanted to believe that she had been able to simply fool the Huntress with her at times amazing skills, but it didn't fit that way in his head.

Oliver had let Helena get away with hurting Tommy, had agreed to help her when it'd seemed the only alternative was killing her. So if she'd only threatened Felicity, like her mere presence had
been a silent threat towards Oliver's family, then why wouldn't she have come back to him afterwards once she realized Felicity had sent him to the wrong place? Sure, she had to know he wouldn't let her anywhere near Felicity again, but that card had already played and failed her.

If she wanted to find her father now, the only chance she’d have was convincing Felicity to find the real intel, and her only shot at that would be through him. She’d tried going around him already, and it hadn’t worked. If intimidation hadn’t worked once, it wasn’t likely to work again either. So she’d have to try different means. Meaning either convincing Oliver to convince Felicity, or pleading with the other woman directly, and she’d have a better chance of convincing her one-time lover than she’d ever have with Felicity.

Unless the Huntress had hurt Felicity.

Helena’s failure to return could mean only one of two things and that was one of them. If she’d hurt Felicity, she wouldn’t be wrong to believe she wouldn’t be able to talk Oliver around again after she’d threatened Felicity. Because she knew the threat alone was enough to lose his good will—or because she’d done more than just threaten the blonde.

The only other possibility, the one that the part of his conscious couldn’t help but care for the brunette kept coming back to, was that the other archer might have recaptured her after the bizarre rescue and release earlier that same night.

Either way, Oliver hoped he was just imagining the worst. Hoped that the plentiful fuel his imagination had to set that fire ablaze was making all of this seem even worse in his head as he went back and forth between the two possibilities.

But how calmly the computer genius had accepted what'd happened kept making him pause. It reminded him of the surprising skills she was only just starting to own up to, and the strange history that correlated to them.

It didn’t ultimately matter if Felicity had taken up learning how to use a sword because of some movie or book, or if it’d been to honor the grandfather she’d never met. It seemed more likely that it was something passed down in her family, but it could just be a more physical hobby she’d turned to on the rare occasions she didn't feel like taking apart computers. That wasn’t what bothered him about it though, because neither true dedication nor a mere hobby should have been nearly enough to prepare Felicity to face the Huntress.

She shouldn’t be able to just shrug off someone threatening her life. To her it should be shocking and horrible. Not something she could just move past, like it was something that’d happened that
wasn’t good but also wasn’t worth worrying about afterwards either.

It didn’t make any sense!

Never mind the fact that even the most simple of physical intimidation tactics the Huntress might’ve employed could have reopened the knife wound in Felicity's shoulder all too easily. Even if it had looked like that cut hadn't been half as bad as he'd remembered by the time Verdant opened. In fact, it’d looked all healed by then, so it maybe his memories of her blood and hurt flesh were made worse than the reality by his own dark mind.

But that was before Helena was anywhere near her.

And if that wound was no more than a scar that was easily hidden by make-up, why had Felicity been so careful of her shoulder the next day?

The more Oliver thought about it, the more it seemed likely that Helena had hurt her. Because he couldn’t quite forget how furiously Helena had reacted when she realized Laurel was the ex-girlfriend he'd told her about. That Laurel was with Tommy now had meant nothing to her. The fact that Oliver wouldn't willingly come between them was nothing, too. If Helena had been so jealous of an ex-girlfriend because he'd mentioned her once before they'd met, wouldn’t she react even more viciously to meeting a woman he was dating who even he knew he was already more than halfway in love with?

"So she seemed okay?" Tommy threw into the strained silence again, and how slowly he took his next sip of beer made the archer realize his own bottle was getting pretty light now, too. "After, I mean?"

The real concern in his friend's voice made something untie a little in Oliver's chest—something that'd knotted up when he'd had to accept that saving his friend's father might well have cost him that friendship, it—started to loosen a little bit now. Just like the knot next to it, the one that became tighter and tighter every time Felicity might be in trouble, only easing when the blonde offered him her smiles; when she could offer him her smiles.

"Last night, I thought she was just really shaken up," Oliver found himself acknowledging, remembering how pale and shaky she’d been when he finally got to the tech department that was deserted by everyone except her. She had been shaky then, it was what’d made leaving her to chase after the Huntress so hard. But this morning she’d just been moving very carefully. He couldn’t know for sure that she’d been hurt, because if she was she was doing a much better job of hiding it than even he sometimes could. "And mad, too," he added after a moment.
Except she hadn’t been angry. That she hadn’t even mentioned the door he’d busted down yet, even though Digg had already repaired it for her, was just another point of confusion, too. Shouldn’t that be something that’d bother her more?

"Makes sense," Tommy commented, pausing a moment before going on in a tone that didn’t quite echo his friend and wingmen from before, but then maybe it shouldn’t. "So Smoaky actually wanted more time with your mom and no back-up, huh?" he shook his head again. "Gutsy. Even Laurel avoided Missus Q till you two had been dating for years."

“Most of high school, yeah,” Oliver shook his own head again slowly. "Felicity isn't afraid of her."

She’d stood up to him, so that shouldn’t be all that surprising, but somehow it still was.

"Well, after facing down the bonda—"

"Can you not call her that?" the vigilante cut him short. "I get why you hate Helena, Tommy. I do. I'm not at all happy with her myself these days. But that makes her sound like," he shook his head. "You know, like one of those girls whose numbers we used to keep to maybe call. And she… she wasn’t."

Just thinking about the extensive lists of contacts the pair of them had once kept with pride—on separate phones from the ones their family and real friends knew, of course—made Oliver scowl in the way that only thoughts on what a waste he used to be could. Where any of those secondary phones happened to be now hardly mattered, but the fact that they'd once existed was yet another reminder that the past that came before The Gambit sank had a lot to do with why he'd deserved what came after. And while falling back into partying and clubbing with random girls might've seemed like a good idea as a cover for when he really came home again, Oliver was glad that plan hadn’t played out the easy way he’d expected. He had changed, so he really preferred where his life seemed to be going with Felicity's help instead. That didn't mean he could believe he deserved it, but somehow he doubted he ever would, but it was still true.

The look Tommy’s face twisted up into at that emphasized just how much he, too, needed that next swallow of beer before he could answer. "After that performance?" he indicated the still wrapped hand towards the floor. "No way she'd make my list. Not that I still have one. Deleted 'em all little before I moved in with Laurel." He commented, then shrugged. "Got an extra phone still, for business—might wanta think about doin' that yourself."
Oliver finished off what was left of his beer, snorting as he set his one empty bottle down. "My old phones would be out of date these days. Not sure they weren't trashed while I was gone, even if my mom didn't want my room changed. Raisa always hated those things." He chuckled once. "Didn't even look for 'em when I got back."

If anything could show how uninterested he'd been in becoming his former self again, that definitely did. Even if he hadn't recognized it at the time.

"'Spite my best efforts," Tommy nodded, then blinked. "But you probably already have another phone for the... other stuff, right?" he gestured with his hurt hand again, now at nothing, but it wasn't necessary.

"A few of 'em, yeah," Oliver confessed, because he had no reason not to tell his friend that much at this point.

Tommy hesitated a second, then visibly made himself relax again. "But after facing that bitch down, your mom can't be that scary, Ollie." He smirked suddenly. "Assuming that mouth of Smoaky's doesn't get her in trouble."

Oliver rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything as he watched his friend take another sip. The other man wasn't wrong: that was why Felicity's refusal to let him rescuer had surprised him so much.

"But you said Smoaky knows your not-ex might still be after her, right?"

"Yeah," the vigilante grunted.

Tommy stared at the beer bottle he'd just set down on the table, shaking his head a moment later. "And she's just out to lunch with your mom, pretending nothing's wrong?"

Oliver grunted again, "Yeah."

His friend was quiet for several longer moments, with both of them just contemplating their now empty beers. Then he finally said, "Damn. Gonna have to ask her how she does it."
That made the archer blink at him in surprise yet again, but his friend was going on before he could think of a response to that.

"Is it always like this?"

"Like what?" Oliver asked, confused and not even trying to hide it.

"Knowing what you're actually doing all the time. Worrying about what's gonna come next..." Tommy trailed off with a wince. "And you're the one that's actually running around in the leather getup and..." he trailed off again, glancing towards the bar where the early crew was just starting to get everything ready for opening later in the evening. "How have you not gone off the deep end already?"

The archer hesitated for another long moment before sighing, "I have. More than once..." he hesitated again for a second, then added, "Helps having friends to find my way back to."

Some people called them anchors. Others refused to acknowledge the dependency at all. Oliver, himself, had spent years with the idea of hope helping him survive, but when he’d finally been able to come back here, he’d tried to emulate the second, seemingly stronger group. With Digg and Felicity, though, he had started to remember that friends were just as important as family. Not only as anchors, but because no words could define friends and family better than themselves.

Tommy's chuckle sounded a little too dark and a little too tired. "Not sure I deserve to say this," he admitted, raising his bottle when the vigilante's eyes rose from the table this time. "But I'll drink to that."

Oliver had to smile back, at least a little, as he clicked his nearly empty bottle with Tommy’s. It didn’t matter that there was barely a sip left his bottle. Not when he seemed to have another unexpected gift right here.

Amazing as it was, his friend may have actually forgiven him. However impossible that seemed.

His smile had to fade though as he set his now empty bottle down. "I didn’t think Helena would hurt her, not until I heard her..." he found himself acknowledging.

It'd been a very nasty shock: that sudden realization that the Huntress had gone after Felicity. That
Felicity was in danger, and he was at least ten minutes away from being able to help her. And he only managed that ten minutes because he’d been speeding by cars that were also not doing the speed limit and he hadn’t stopped for a single red light. It was fortunate that none of the S.C.P.D were around to follow him all the way to Q.C, because he hadn’t been about to consider any kind of detour.

“Didn’t think you did,” Tommy told him. He didn't reference his own reasonable emotions against the mob-princess turned mob-slayer anymore than that. Instead of the understandable animosity, he offered encouragement. “You were mad enough when she went after me. Bet you considered the whole arrow thing for Smoaky.”

Oliver couldn’t deny that, so he didn’t say anything. Agreeing or disagreeing now about what he could or should have done about Helena could make no difference, so it wasn’t something he wanted to argue about either. Even if it sounded like his friend might be coming around to the idea that there were actually some people out there that you had to kill before they could hurt you or someone you cared for… when that was someone he’d wanted to save from herself, however, it wasn’t a point he could find it in himself to argue now.

Tommy shook his head again. "But she's just out to lunch with your mom, pretending nothing's wrong…"

Oliver grunted again, "Yeah."

His friend was quiet for several long moments, then he finally said, "Damn. I’m really gonna have to ask her how she does it. Deals with all of it, I mean."

Oliver shrugged, not sure what he could really say to that. Pointing out that he was the one under the hood aiming at arrows at Starling City's worst didn't seem like a great idea. Tommy already knew all of that. And it wasn't like he had any real clear view of his friend's point-of-view like Felicity and to some extent Digg would. No, back on the island Yao Fei and Slade might've both thought he was useless to start with, but even Slade had admitted training him up into suitable backup was the only chance either of them had. Ever since then, he’d always been either in thick of the action or preparing for it. But none of that seemed like something his best friend would appreciate hearing, no matter how much more friendly and forgiving Tommy seemed tonight.

"Hey, you okay?" his friend asked, and yes there was definitely some concern in his voice and the look directed the archer's way.

"Not really," Oliver found himself answering honestly again.
Tommy was quiet a long moment, and then he was talking even more quietly than before: his voice both apologetic and somehow reminiscent of when they'd managed to find themselves in trouble yet again in years past. Except back then they'd always been in trouble together. "Look, I know that I've been a jerk lately..."

From there the words seemed to rush out of him like a quiet explosion, with no time for Oliver to even try and interrupt.

"I just—I couldn't understand how you could keep such a huge secret from me." He sighed, shaking his head. "But I... I never considered the toll it must take on you."

Oliver nodded, answering honestly again—maybe partially because of the early beer he'd already downed, but also because this conversation all but demanded it of him. "Lying to the people that are closest to me... It's the hardest part."

And it was yet another reason why Felicity Smoak felt like such a gift to him. A gift he didn't deserve, of course, but a gift all the same. No matter what she was hiding... it wasn't like her secrets could be worse than his own.

"I get that," Tommy accepted sincerely.

The deep sigh Oliver released was one of relief, but the words that followed it—now that he could talk to his friend again—were more worries all the same. "Do you think... Maybe it's wrong? To think that I can have it both ways..."

"What?" the frown was clear in his friend's voice, so the archer didn't have to look up from the tabletop to see it.

But Oliver did look up anyway, meeting Tommy's eyes as he explained. "That I can do..." he nodded meaningfully, "what I do, and still have a normal life. With anyone."

The thought of letting Felicity go hurt more than watching Laurel walk away or walking away from her ever had. A lot more. And he knew it might be partially because the sheer number of times he and Laurel had broken up and gotten back together had all blended together in his head over the years, a hurtful but predictable routine after the first time through. But it was also because he'd already let the bright, angelic genius into his life and now couldn't imagine his world without
her in it. He could imagine though that that world would be dark and cold again, without her brightness and warmth in it. Better that, though, then the thought of anything happening to her because of him.

After all, Laurel ending up with Tommy might've been a bit of a surprise, but it wasn’t like Oliver had really expected her to wait for him for five years. Half a decade when everyone thought he was dead, and all of that after he and Sara had cheated on her together. And after Sara had died because of it…

And Felicity had already inserted herself into the darker aspects of his life, his real life, like she belonged there. His light in the shadows. Shadows that'd suddenly be very, very dark if that light was sent away. Only, it'd be inexplicably worse—world ending, even—if that light weren't just gone, but out. Not somewhere else, somewhere safe: but... dead.

If she couldn’t stay safe as shining sun, he’d rather make her one of his treasured stars. Someone he could check on every now and again, to make sure she was safe and happy, and take comfort in the fact that she was better off without him. But he didn’t know if he could really bring himself to do it.

"Except, if you're alone," Tommy leaned down a little to make sure Oliver was paying attention as he finished. "You're never going to be happy."

"Maybe not," the archer acknowledged, "But me being happy isn't what's important."

He'd lived a life of complete luxury and indulgence for years. So fixated on his own happiness that he couldn't see anything else at all. The Gambit, Lian Yu and everything else that followed had forced him out of that mold and into another...

"And Felicity?" Tommy demanded, startling his friend again.

Oliver blinked at him. "What?"

"Isn't her happiness important?" his friend demanded, shaking his head from side to side with his frown fixed in place. "Cause, I gotta say, Ollie, this is starting to sound an awful lot like you're thinking of running... and sometimes I think I'm still trying to help Laurel get over that."
Oliver clenched one fist at that, punishing nails biting just a bit into his palm. "But she'd be safer —"

"Safe's overrated," Tommy insisted. "I get it. I do. Wanting her to be safe. I even get thinking that maybe she'd be better off without you... God knows I wonder every day if Laurel's gonna come to her senses and kick my ass to the curb. But she says she wants to be with me, and Felicity wants to be with you. And Ollie, isn't that her choice?"

He was probably talking about Laurel just as much as Felicity at this point, all things considered. But that didn't make him wrong.

"She keeps saying that," Oliver sighed. "But if something happened to her, if she died because of me—"

"You think you'd let her die? Really?" Tommy cut in sharply. "You let some whacko talk you into helping her commit murder because she was hurting me. You really think you'd have ever let her anywhere near Felicity?"

"Of course not," Oliver scowled as the image of Felicity in the same position he'd found Tommy in—at the Huntress's mercy—flashed through his head. Shaking that off was not an easy thing when the same image or worse had been assaulting his imagination ever since he heard Helena introducing herself to Felicity on the other side of the phone. "But I didn't want her near you either. She still got to you—and to Felicity—anyway. I can't—"

"Can't control the whole world, yeah," Tommy interrupted, nodding sharply. "No one can. No matter what the hell happened to you on that island to make you... you know. This. You're still only human, Ollie." He hurried on before his friend could reply. "And you need friends. Need your family. And, yeah, love."

Oliver shook his head. "But—"

"You know, I'm pretty sure I know when you met her," Tommy interrupted him again. "I remember, couple months back, wondering why you seemed more 'you.' A little less damaged. Maybe I should've asked about it," his friend shrugged. "But the second I actually saw you with her? I was wondering when your mom would start planning the wedding."

That surprised a snort out of him. "Speedy's the one that's threatening that."
"Really?"

Oliver snorted, smiling a little at the memory. "Actually, she said she’d recommend some places to propose."

"Sounds like our Speedy," Tommy snorted too, wearing that same fond smile they both reserved for the girl that used to follow them around the mansion whenever they deigned to be there.

"My mom, I think, is trying to turn her into her successor at Q.C, or something like that," Oliver admitted, shaking his head. Half-wishing for that second beer he wouldn’t allow himself. "Keep the family business in the family, I guess."

Maybe he should’ve tried to talk to his genius this morning about the meeting with his mother and what the woman who’d given birth to him had planned for his girlfriend. Felicity had been adamant though, even before today, about him not stepping in at work. She wouldn’t even let him research her supervisor himself, let alone do it for him, to see if there was any reason the vigilante could pay him a visit despite his name not being on the List. The huge promotion his mom hit her with this morning got her away from that guy, and was only part of the recognition the honest to God genius more than deserved.

So he told himself that maybe Walter had been keeping a close eye on Felicity with this career path in mind for her. Sure, his mom’s motivations couldn’t be clearer to her son, but that he could understand, too. Moira Queen was moving faster than he could ever have expected her to, but she had been widowed one already. Maybe twice now. And Oliver had already made a very public show of turning town any active role in Queen Consolidated himself—he’d made it as outrageously public and embarrassing he could, to get the point across and hammer it home. So, of course, it’d come back to haunt him. And his mother taking the chance to promote the Q.C employee he was dating as another attempt at keeping the business in the family. Hell, after she’d really gotten Felicity setup in her new job, she’d probably join Thea in suggesting places to propose.

And Felicity really was a genius, so this wasn’t even a bad move on the acting-C.E.O’s part. Not too far out of left field, just from somewhere over there.

"Surprised you're not following her anyway," Tommy commented, again bringing him out of his thoughts.

"Digg's keeping an eye on them," Oliver sighed, turning his now empty beer bottle around in his hand as he studied it. "They'd spot me right away, but he can blend in."
Actually his mom's security detail would probably notice Diggle, too. If they didn’t, Digg would definitely be having some words with them later. And Felicity would probably spot their team member, too. But Helena might not.

Digg had already told him that the ladies were up in one of the downtown area's 'restaurants in the sky,' which meant they were mostly safe from Helena. Especially if the Huntress still held any hope at all of finding her father... rather than just taking her vengeance on Felicity instead.

No matter how far gone Helena was, though, Oliver couldn't completely see her going after his girlfriend. If only because her homicidal hatred was reserved for her father, so her actually switching targets to Felicity while he still lived seemed unlikely. Especially while his girlfriend and his mother were both there. If she was willing to go after his family, after all, she wouldn't have just given him the scares with Thea and Tommy.

Or so he hoped.

He had to hope that, because if it wasn't true then even Digg might not be enough to stop the Huntress. And that'd mean he'd have to kill her...

"Don't know how she does it. Either of 'em," Tommy was shaking his head again when the archer looked back at him. "I mean, it's gotta be awkward with your mom. Smoaky working at Q.C and everything. In I.T, right?"

“Not anymore...” Oliver was relieved to say, no matter what complications might arise from the big change. “Felicity's ridiculously over-qualified—got a doctorate and everything. Mom's thrilled. So she's promoting her.” He sighed. "I think she's mostly managed to convince Felicity it's not because she's my girlfriend."

He had known about it before Felicity found out today, mainly because when he'd gone to his mother demanding promises that she wouldn't give Felicity a hard time at *Queen Consolidated*, she'd assured him that she had no intention of doing any such thing. That she was, in fact, planning on going through with the promotion that Walter had been getting ready for the computer genius before he vanished. And *that* was something Oliver did not want to get in the way of, not when it should mean much more reasonable working hours. During the day, anyway. Watching her walk away towards the elevator this morning, still favoring her shoulder, hadn't been easy.

Oliver had known better than to get in her way at work, even when his name was on the building.
He just really hoped that she didn't focus too much on his mom's motivations rather than the rewards, because she deserved so much better than Q.C had done for her so far...

"Yeah, sounds like your mom," Tommy echoed his earlier statement with the requalification. "She always loved that Laurel wanted to be a lawyer, remember? Bet she's over the moon that you're dating a doctor…" he trailed off as he considered his own words, then his nose wrinkled in that clear gesture of confusion he’d had since their nursery days. “Do they actually call her a computer doctor?"

"Doctorate in Computer Science, so yeah, I guess," Oliver shrugged. "She'll do great, wherever mom puts her. But dating me—"

"Oh, so now you're worried about her dating you, not everything else?" Tommy was rolling her eyes when the vigilante looked back at him. "Give yourself a break, Ollie."

"I can't. I've—"

"How many lives have you saved?" Tommy interrupted again, continuing when his friend only blinked at him. "Doing the uh, you know, thing?"

It should sound stupid, but his friend being unwilling to endanger the vigilante by taking the risk of saying too much in public was almost heartening enough to make Oliver nod along with what he was saying. Almost, but not quite: because Tommy really didn’t know the half of what he’d done. And what he’d failed to do.

Oliver shook his head, "I don't—I haven't—"

"You saved Laurel a few months ago. And her client. The guy that was framed for his wife's murder. Can’t remember his name, but he was all over the news leading up to his execution that you and Laurel prevented—and you had to save both of them in that prison riot. And before that, you saved us when we were kidnapped—or me, at least," Tommy shook his head. "From what Smoaky said, there's gotta be more than that?"

"What..." Oliver blinked at him, then frowned. "When did you talk to Felicity about this?"

"We’ve had a few chats downstairs. She said I can drop by—she hates the door up here not being
That surprised a snort from him. "Cooler?"

“You know, like a secret door or something? Not a bookcase, ’cause everyone would wonder what the hell that was doing here. But maybe we could hide it in a special wine closet. Something like that...” His friend shrugged, and kept going while Oliver was wondering where he should start on the subject of secret doors or if he should start at all. "Anyway, she's sent me a few emails, too. They delete themselves right after I read them—it's kind of impressive. And, you know, scary," he shook his head. "I'm pretty sure that if you do leave her? Your girlfriend's completely capable of making your life hell."

Oliver outright laughed a little at that. "She probably is," he agreed easily. He’d seen more than once himself just how impressive her hacking skills could be, even though she downplayed them almost as frequently as she didn't.

"Must've made you wish you had her covering your tracks with the video footage thing a few months ago."

"No. I'd covered them—too well, apparently," Oliver frowned as he explained. "I wasn't really sure that someone seeing The Hood while I was on house arrest would be enough for Detective Lance. It was starting to look like Laurel might actually have to represent me in court for a while there."

"Yeah, then someone sent a hitman after you," Tommy snorted, but it just as quickly morphed into a sudden scowl. "Wait. Someone did—"

"Yeah, Tommy. I didn't hire someone to do that," Oliver answered the accusation with a wince, a little hurt that his childhood best friend actually thought that little of him. Especially since Detective Lance had killed the guy, and Oliver would have done it, if he’d gotten over his surprise at being attacked in him home a little sooner. If he had, it would’ve been self-defense even by the detective’s standards, but might be a huge leap for Tommy’s mind to make now that he knew what his friend was up to most nights.

But, then again, like Felicity had said: Tommy Merlyn had never faced terrors like mercenaries, assassins, spies and super-soldiers. Not like Oliver had, and the archer could find it in himself to be thankful for that, no matter how hard it made some conversations these days.
They were both silent for a painful moment, listening to the sounds of the crew still setting up behind the bar and up on stage. All static noise that was expected from everyone around them, so not even his paranoid subconscious was paying too much attention to it.

Then Tommy sighed, "Sorry, I didn't—"

"Don't worry about it," Oliver cut him off again.

But Tommy shook his head. "No. No, that was uncalled for, Ollie. I don't know..." he grimaced, and sighed again. "You girlfriend pointed out that I really don't know anything about what you're doing. That everything that makes it to the media, or even through Laurel, isn't the whole picture." He swallowed, but kept soldiering on. "It wasn’t ever the whole picture when T.M.Z got a picture from some of the paps that used to stalk us back then. Or now, either. Or me, anyway. But the stuff about you, too. I mean, I know how screwed up and spun around some of those stories were back then. It’s never the whole picture, or even a true story, ‘cause the media don’t care about any of that."

"Wait, what did she—"

"Let me finish. Please," His friend insisted, looking at the ceiling like what he wanted to say was written up there. Then he sighed before going on. "I lost you once, Ollie. And we've all changed. Not just you. Me. Your mom and Thea. Laurel." He shook his head again then. "It's wrong for me to be angry that you didn't come back the same as you were when... well, before," Tommy only met his eyes then, looking so serious it surprised the vigilante. "I'm sorry. Really, man, I am."

Oliver held his gaze for a long moment, before breaking eye-contact with a deliberate blink he'd allow himself for few people, and nodding as he offered a small, sincere smile. "Okay."

A large part of him wished Felicity had given him a heads up on whatever the hell she'd talked to Tommy about. Or that she even was talking to Tommy. And when?

But he hadn’t given her a heads up about his mom, either, and this wasn’t a bad thing. It hadn't taken him long on Lian Yu to realize that you had to take all the good things you could. You had to squirrel them all away, like nuts for the long winter. Because there was no guarantee they'd be around for long. And even if they lasted longer than expected, so the winter would, too. Not losing his best friend's friendship was a good thing, though, no matter what happened next. However it was happening in the end.
"Good," Tommy sighed this time with a half laugh. "Glad to finally get that out." The playful half-smirk that followed was almost as much of a relief as the apology itself had been. "So, I'm sure your mom and Speedy are already after you on all things to do with you new girlfriend, but what are you going to do to apologize?"

Oliver found himself frowning again. "Apologize?"

After everything Tommy had said, his friend obviously meant of Felicity, not himself. But Oliver had already said sorry for letting Helena get anywhere near her. It'd rolled off his tongue without him even thinking about it last night. She'd accepted it with ease that he still found strange; especially considering how she'd reacted to his and Digg's efforts to protect her after the fact.

"She doesn't want me to do anything about Helena," Oliver was grimacing as he said it. "And I'll keep looking for her, but it's starting to look like she must've left town—"

"I wasn't talking about the crazy crossbow bitch, Ollie," Tommy cut in then considered it with a shrug. "Though you should probably send Smoaky some pretty nice flowers for that, too. And chocolates, the good ones. Maybe with wine, too. But I was talking about your mom."

"My mom?" the vigilante blinked at him. "You mean the promotion?"

"Don't know about that, since she seems to be taking it so well. So far, anyway," Tommy shrugged. "But I do know you introduced her to your mom and Speedy opening night here, then left her to their mercies to rescue me. Speedy told me. And you had to let her go meet with your mom alone for the work stuff, which is gonna probably be happening a lot more if your mom has anything to say about it, whether Smoaky wanted or likes the new job or now. And now she's being all self-sacrificing and not making you save her from lunch with Missus Q, too. If that doesn't call for a really nice apology-date, I'm not sure what does."

Oliver was wincing before he was halfway through. "Probably does," he agreed, sighing another time. "Actually, I owe her more dates anyway. We've only gone on a few."

His friend blinked at him. "What?"

"The club opening was our third date, technically," he admitted reluctantly.
"...Wow," Tommy shook his head. "Well, at least you have the five year seclusion thing as an excuse. But a really nice date’s definitely a must at this point, Ollie."

Considering they'd just been talking about whether or not he even deserved to be dating her at all not that long ago, it seemed like quite a leap to make. But Oliver knew, deep down, that his friend wasn't wrong, either. So he sighed again. "Yeah... any suggestions?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Again, I can’t apologize enough for how long this update took, so, again: sorry! :-(
Well, we’re not yet to the end of this story, but we are getting close now. Yes, the next one’s already in the works. No, because it’s been asked: I haven’t picked a name yet. Though I do have a list. Any suggestions are welcome.
More to come soon. I mean it. Really.
Thanks for reading!
And now, a confession: the only reason you’re not getting another rant on whatever’s going on in Arrow lately is I honestly haven’t been watching for a while now. I bought the season pass at the start of the season, so I have the episodes, but I’ve only watched the first few episodes so far. Since then I’ve followed some of the spoiler articles and what have you, but haven’t had any real desire to inflict upon myself whatever the writers have come up with now. As a result, my Arrow fan fiction is probably suffering, too. Though I haven’t had too much free time lately, either.
If any of you are particularly gung-ho about the current season, think Arrow’s making a comeback, etc. I wouldn’t mind hearing from you. And no, I don’t mind spoilers at all. Maybe it’d help me start watching again and stay interested in the series in general. Though either way I probably won’t buy the season pass next year: either I’ll just go back to buying an episode at a time on iTunes until it’s just economical to finish the season that way instead or I’ll watch scenes on YouTube until it comes out on Netflix. Unless they do a really fabulous job closing the season.
Don’t get me wrong, I still like Arrow fan fiction. The show itself has just lost a lot of its draw for me. Like I’ll watch an episode once I’ve start it, but I have to really talk myself into actually hitting play. If that makes sense.
And I still like MY fan fiction, and have no plans to stop writing it, but it may take longer if the show completely loses me in future seasons. Inspiration is always helpful, and the lack of it never is. *sigh*
Again, I have NO plans to stop writing. Plenty of more plans for this series.
And I will try to update again much, MUCH sooner this time!
Thanks for reading! :)
Comments are always appreciated! :-D
~ Jess
The Test

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity finally let out a long, relieved breath as she felt the power naturally ebb. Her Quickening was pure power thrumming beneath her skin, but it was still very much a part of her. Never the most defining part, but certainly one of them. Making it do more than its primary purpose was never a small or easy task, but it was still hers to direct, so it obeyed. But now, with her command fulfilled, it sank back down into her blood and bones, settling in her very cells.

Most of it, anyway—some of it had gotten away. When she opened her eyes she could see where it'd gone. Where that slight excess of power had pulse out and away from her. Because, for that moment, all the candles lighting and scenting her living room were flaring unnaturally brighter and outside the streetlights flickered a few times. For barely more than that moment, but it was enough. The digital clock that she hadn’t bothered to unplug, unlike almost every other device nearby, was flashing 12:00 over and over again, instead of the actual time.

The Immortal grimaced, slightly disappointed, but not really surprised. It was why she'd put all the electronics that mattered in her bedroom. Well, except for her television, but it should be relatively safe just unplugged. It was still intact—and it was the most likely device to explode, so at least that hadn’t happened this time. Granted, it’d been a while since that had happened.

All the same, maybe it wasn’t a wonderful idea to try deep meditative healing while she was still so tired. It made her whole again, yes, but that weariness seemed to weigh more now, too. So it may still come back to bite her. Especially if Oliver, or Digg, noticed just how much more tired she was than she was admitting. What with the two of them acting like they expected her to faint on them at any moment. And they weren't even around when women had to wear the corsets that did...
restrict your breathing more than a bit.

It’d be a while before their edge of worry regarding the Huntress would start to wear off. They didn’t know that Helena Bertinelli hadn’t left of her own volition. And they didn’t know that she wouldn’t be able to come back anytime soon either. Which didn’t help her escape the conundrum of intrigues she’d found herself in the middle of at all, but it was nonetheless necessary…

With a single headshake, Felicity forced herself to focus on the objective again. How hard it was, however, was further proof of exactly how exhausted—how worn down—she was. Forced healing was never ‘easy,’ per say, but not it’d seemed harder than it had in a very, very long time. And even while meditating, her mind was wandering off all on its own.

She rolled her neck, and then slowly brought her arms up alongside. Stretched straight and relished that lazy feeling as she carefully twisted this way and that to confirm that there was, in fact, no lingering injury. There shouldn't be, but it was always better to be safe than sorry. Especially with the two men in her life and their interest in her well-being potentially leading far too easily back to all those secrets she just couldn't convince herself to share. Not yet, at least.

So her shoulder had to be whole again. Oliver and Diggle had seen that cut that was but a memory healed, so she couldn’t let them see that it’d become a hole through her shoulder in just as many days as the other wound had healed. That meant healing herself...

Normally it wasn’t a problem. Normally, merely accelerating her natural healing factor wasn’t even a slight strain: not like stretching her Quickening to tend to another was. And even that hadn’t been particularly hard for her in centuries, save for those times she’d tried to extend a life that was at its natural end. Mortals were not Pre-Immortals, after all, and even a determined Immortal’s strength could not hold out forever. But what she’d just done tonight hadn’t resembled a hardship for her in more than a millennium. But normally she wasn’t already very tired. Her mind was more than strong enough to manipulate her Quickening and her body to her will anyway, but it would have been easier after at least a good night’s sleep.

Typically she didn’t bother with this, of course. If her body and subconscious didn’t consider an injury serious enough to make her Quickening instantaneously repair it with no conscious command on her part, then it simply wasn’t serious. It didn’t matter, because it’d soon be gone anyway, and it wouldn’t even leave a scar for her to remember it by. More often than not it just seemed easier to ignore the pain that was there, and be careful of the injury for the little while it took to mend. Awakening, commanding and then settling her Quickening again was considerably more work by comparison, and the time it took her to heal naturally was so very little when it was compared to mortals.

But for Oliver and Diggle. The vigilante and bodyguard had both already proven themselves to be
too observant. More about some things than others, but the worried glances they kept sending her way were hard for her to miss…

Those glances, and those worries, were why Felicity couldn't wait for her shoulder to heal naturally. Fortunately, she'd had this window of time to fix it—and she hadn't even needed to put on any kind of show to create it. All she had to do was promise her security system would stay on while Oliver was out on his patrol, with Digg monitoring both him on comms and her house from the Foundry...

Wait. Shit…

Felicity winced as she realized a problem there. If the clock in here had gone out and the streetlights outside had definitely just been flickering back on when she opened her eyes...

A glanced towards her front door made her sigh. It wasn't lit at all, green or red, which meant that generator had fritzed, too… Dammit.

Ring-Ring-Ring...


The echoing sound of her cell phone ringing in the bedroom a moment later, therefore, wasn't a surprise at all. With another grimace Felicity forced herself to rise to her feet in a move that her now healed body could complete with its usual ease, even if she was too tired. Even if exhausted might be a much better word at this point. Still, she quickly hurried for the bedroom, where the ringing phone was safely stored along with all her other essential electronics.

Ring-Ring-Ring...

Felicity didn't need to glance at the caller I.D to know who was calling, because it was pretty obvious, but she did anyway just to be sure. She was right. Damn.

Ring—
"Hey, Digg," she said as she picked it up before it could finish the third set of bells.

"Felicity," the bodyguard didn't even try to hide his worry, or his relief. "What happened? Your house—"

"Yeah, the power went out for a few minutes there," Felicity interrupted, keeping her tone light and trying to not sound too tired. The first she could pull off with some effort, but the second was a lot harder. "I thought the generator was gonna kick on, but then the power just came back, so it must've mixed the security system up."

Diggle sighed, "Thought that's what its batteries were for?" he grumbled, but still managed to sound relieved as he said it.

Really, what did he expect? That she’d be hiding in her bathroom after the Huntress burst in through the living room window? Actually, that was probably where his worried brain had already gone. Maybe she should think of some way to make them realize Helena Bertinelli wasn’t anywhere near Starling City anymore? Was there a way to demonstrate that that wouldn’t lead to Oliver mounting some daring rescue of the vengeful villainess?

"Sorry?" she offered in return, just barely biting back a yawn before going on. "But it's not like all of us can live in places like the Queen Mansion," she pointed out, and then frowned. "Wait, Oliver's not—"

"No, he's still down at the docks," Digg cut in to reassure her. "Thought I'd try calling you first before I let him know. You sure the house's power wasn't cut? Can you see if your neighbors—"

"Thank you. And the streetlights were out, too, so I'm pretty sure there isn't a crazy lady with a crossbow about to burst in through one of my windows. Or, you know, my poor kitchen door."

The former soldier sighed. "Not funny, Felicity."

"Eh, it's a little funny," the Immortal insisted with a small smile, going on before the bodyguard could get anymore aggravated. "I'm fine, Digg. Really. It shouldn't take me more than a few minutes to get the system up and running again. You just go back to listening to Oliver do stupid things, okay?"
Digg snorted, "Roger that," he agreed, but didn't hang up right away. "I'll call to check-in again in fifteen minutes if the systems not up yet"

The Immortal rolled her eyes, but knew better than to argue further. One word to Oliver, after all, and the archer would soon be coming in her back door again, though hopefully he'd knock first this time. "Fine," she sighed, then made herself say, "Thank you, Digg."

"You're welcome."

Ending the call then, Felicity sighed as she tossed her phone back down on her bed, finally allowing herself one big yawn. Then she turned to go out of her bedroom again to get restarting the system over with sooner rather than later. But an unexpected instinct made her pause for half a second.

It wasn't the Buzz of another Immortal, or even a Pre-Immortal. No, it was simply the awareness that someone was watching her.

The Immortal didn't let herself react by looking towards the windows that let sunlight stream into her bedroom every morning. Her ever sharp eyes easily picked out shapes that shouldn't be there even in the shadows of night, even only peripherally, but outright looking would let her watcher know she'd noticed, while pretending she hadn't was often the easiest way to escape Immortals and Watchers alike… Though if a Watcher had actually found her home, she would be pissed.

So, instead of looking, Felicitas stepped back towards the doors like she'd started to do a second before, senses on high alert for whatever was coming next all the while.

After actively using her Quickening to accelerate her healing just a few minutes ago, and opening her mind and therefore all her senses even more than she normally did to the world around her in order to actively control it, she could still feel it burning beneath her skin. However tired she was physically and emotionally, the shock of adrenaline hitting her system was like a bomb beneath her skin: experienced instincts all taking over, ready for yet another fight.

If this were the Huntress coming back for round two, Felicitas would have had a much harder time holding herself back. Raw power didn't like to be caged, and it took time for it calm down naturally.

Fortunately, Helena Bertinelli should be at least halfway to Nanda Parbat by now, so this couldn't
be her. But it wasn't another Immortal, either. So who was it?

There were four different swords, a dagger and two knives in her bedroom, but the one closest to the door was the easiest to draw without anyone watching from outside that window seeing if they were watching her shadow through the drapes.

Sword in hand then, Felicitas stopped in the doorway and closed her eyes again. Reaching out with her mind, and her burning Quickening, trying to quickly think through what it was telling her.

Nick wasn't home yet. He must be working late. Very late. So the familiar flare of his Quickening wasn't there to pollute the nearby landscape yet.

Not that she needed to send her senses that far. There were several highly alert minds outside her home... One of them was a Pre-Immortal. A Pre-Immortal and seven—no, eight other fighters. Warriors minds, all intent on her.

Not Watchers, then. Not these days anyway.

In times not so long past, most Watchers were also soldiers: there network stretching primarily across the British Empire, but through many other European powers waging their wars for colonies around the globe. Before that, many of them had been knights, or at least noblemen—those that could afford to spend their days simply watching others. Though many of them made masterful spies in the intrigues between nations: as the only secret they were sworn not to tell non-Watchers was about Immortals and Immortality, not any other secrets they happened to spy in the meantime. Long before all that, of course, there’d been Rome, but that history was far longer. Far too long for her to think about now.

She hadn’t heard about any headhunters teaming up with mortals recently, and the one outside hadn’t died her First Death yet.

So there really was only one other organization they could be from. Especially since the Pre-Immortal’s presence wasn’t hard to recognize and place...

With a sigh, Felicitas deliberately sent out a pulse of power this time—sending every light in her house and all the ones outside into darkness again. The sound of glass shattering nearby made her wince, knowing exactly which lights she’d overpowered. At least they were inside: not the streetlights that’d be much harder to fix.
With her senses stretched so, and already aware of their presence, Felicitas couldn't miss that the fighters outside were moving closer—some of them prowling like cats, others stalking like wolves: all of them with clearly enough training to control their bodies that well.

Moving quickly, Felicitas hurried for the front door, unlocking it and turning the knob to leave it slightly ajar in one smooth motion before she moved even more quickly across the house to open the back door as well. No need to make fixing the doors necessity, and hopefully open doors may lead to fewer broken windows. She moved halfway back across the room, slipping on one of her armguards and then the other even as she drew her Quickening back in: focusing. They were almost here anyway.

So she mapped out her home. An easy thing to do, as she'd live here for several years now and knew the layout very well, but this method was something she'd always preferred using when she had to battle multiple opponents. Some might call it cheating, but she’d learned long ago that there was no such thing. Not when you were fighting for your life or the lives of those dear to you.

This may not be about her head and betrayal. It might only be about some of the thing already discussed. But it might not.

And she couldn't leave this life. Not yet. So she’d fight.

Felicitas heard the back door open a moment later, and shifted further into the shadows of the alcove, which would keep her out of the intruders’ direct line of sight from either entry. How slowly the men were moving surprised her somewhat. Stealth always took patience and caution, but it was also confirmation that these warriors definitely knew she wasn't just a computer genius. Given who they had to be, because they simply couldn’t be anyone else, that wasn't unexpected.

The dark armor and mask didn’t surprise her when the lead man finally stepped into her view. The armor that Mazin’s warriors wore was exactly what she’d expected. Given the vague familiarity of the Pre-Immortal's presence, and everything else to consider, who else could it be?

"You know," she finally said into the darkness, "It's not nice to drop by without calling first. And we do have these things called phones now."

The man was moving towards her before she was even halfway though, the sword he'd drawn before entering the house raised to strike.
He was a lot slower than she expected from any member of the League of Assassins… but then again Felicitas’ ancient Quickening was still in high-gear after she’d stirred it up and added adrenaline. It might be making her even faster than she realized. Though she’d pay for that later. That it only took her four moves to disarm him, however, was strange. Not that she let that stop her from knocking him out and shoving his falling form in the way of another assassin.

The familiar sound of an arrow firing and whistling through the air seemed especially slow, too, which certainly had to be attributed to her Quickening over-stimulating her senses alongside the adrenaline that’d started burning through her blood and into her muscles in response to the threat. It was easier to catch arrows when you were watching where they were coming from, but with her sixth sense tracking her surroundings the sound was more than enough, her hand easily closing around the shaft before it could hurt her shoulder, which had had more than enough damage done to it lately.

Another swordsman attacked with an actual war-cry as she caught the arrow, and Felicitas felt like rolling her eyes as she parried two strikes before stabbing him in the shoulder with his friend’s arrow.

"Gah!" his guttural shout of pain didn't stop her from kicking his feet out from under him and kicking his head as he fell to knock him out cold. Hopefully not hard enough to break his neck, but it was hard measure her strength right now and he had attacked her. So she didn't feel too bad about it as his crumpled form stayed down on the floor.

Felicity darted at the archer this time as he launched another arrow, catching it even more easily
than the first.

But another swordsman got in her way.

**CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!**

And after three quick parries—that seemed a little faster than the last—and throwing the arrow towards him as a distraction she was able to spin around his next clumsy parry and then slam the hilt of her sword into his face.

*Cra-unch!*

She winced at the sound of his nose and perhaps his jaw breaking, but still grabbed him before he could fall as yet another arrow take flight.

*Thwip...*

Human shields were never something any honorable warrior *liked*, but using other warriors against their allies that way wasn't the same thing as innocent people being pulled into a fight they wanted no part of, let alone as hostages at the mercy of both sides. Not by a long shot. These warriors may only be here under orders, but they had chosen to follow those orders. They'd chosen to fight her, chosen to become her enemy, so the broken parts of his face and the arrow in his arm were at least somewhat deserved.

The sight of three more assassins coming in through her dining room window gave her half a moment's pause out of yet more sheer surprise. *Why* were they prying the windows open with what looked like crowbars instead of simply breaking through them? Or better yet, why weren't they simply coming in through either one of her open doors? The bar Mazin set for his warriors *couldn't* seriously have fallen this far: the standards the man set for himself even before she'd ever agreed to teach him anything wouldn't ever have allowed it…

*Thwip...*

Another arrow from the archer finally pissed her off, so as soon as she'd caught it Felicity threw it straight back at him. Then she blinked as he actually *dropped* his bow in order to catch it, instead of simply stepping aside and firing again. Thereby saving her television from the projectile, but
voluntarily losing his weapon in the process.

**What in the world was this?**

Felicity stepped over to the nearby couch to draw another sword out of its hiding place as the three new men finally climbed in through the window. Considering them, she sighed and headed for the archer instead.

*CLACK! CLACK!*  
*SNAp!*

Said archer managed to block two blows with his bow before she was able to slice through the bowstring and kick his feet out from under him in the same move as the bow broke apart like a small bomb had gone off inside it.

Then the three swordsmen were on her, and while their moves still seemed so strangely slow even to her Quickening-high senses, there were three of them...

*CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!*  
*CLANG!*  
*CLANG! CLANG!*  
*CLANG!*

Felicitas danced around their attacks, swords flying as fast as her hands could move them, frowning as she realized she didn't seem to need to dodge. Every swipe of a sword that her swords weren't moving to block was going much wider than her moves away from those strikes should make them...

The barely-there Buzz of the Pre-Immortal finally coming into her immediate vicinity drew Felicitas’ attention to the front door as it opened and two more fighters entered. Both of them were women and also wearing League armor, though by now there could be no doubt of who the Pre-Immortal drawing her blade while the other woman closed the door behind them was.

Though everything else about this was certainly very strange.
Felicitas ducked under another attack that wouldn't have hit her head anyway, twisting under the man's arm to lock her own around it and quickly heaving him over her shoulder into one of the others as she rolled away and sprung to her feet in time to block the third assassin's attack. How hard the pair landed clued her into just how much more of her Quickening she was definitely drawing on at this point, but the middle of a fight wasn’t when she could force herself and her eternalizing energy to calm down anyway.

**SLAM—THUD!**

**CLANG! CLANG!**

In between parrying his blows, she lashed out with her foot: directly into the face of one of the men struggling to rise, effectively knocking him out as well. Meaning the man he'd been on top of had to get out from underneath his deadweight, too.

**CLANG! CLANG!**

Giving her time to dispatch the third swordsman, even though disarming him and slamming a pommel into the back of his head was a little harder now that she was almost positive Nyssa al Ghul and her warriors weren't actually here to kill her. She hated hurting people anyway, and realizing she really couldn’t justify it as self-defense did not help. But Mazin's daughter and the other woman were coming towards her, so Felicitas quickly grabbed one of the decorative pots by the wall and threw it right at the other man's head, wincing when she noticed that the pot she'd picked was the larger one with her collection of pebbles from around the world in it, but not letting that distract her from the two remaining fighters.

The woman that'd entered with Nyssa moved at her first, attacking with a bo-staff instead of a sword, though she wore one in the same sheathe that all the League fighters had. The Heir herself hung back, making Felicitas raise an eyebrow slightly, but she blocked the other woman's blows easily enough.

**CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!**

**CLANG! CLANG!**

This new woman was trained, but not nearly so much as the others. Let alone Felicitas. Perhaps not new to the League, but not born to it either. Still new enough that her moves were noticeably more choreographed than even the other assassins had been, though that may also be why the woman was wielding a staff instead of a sword tonight. Yet either way it begged the question of why
someone so new to the League would be entrusted with guarding the Heir to the Demon...

**CLANG! CLANG!**

Rendered predictable by her choreography or not, the woman was fast. Faster than the others, but that could be because she didn’t have the level of control needed to hold herself back as they’d not so obviously been bidden. But she had undoubtedly devoted some length of recent time to her training… but only more time could tell if all that training would eventually come together into a truly formidable warrior. That or a fight in which the girl knew not to even try and hold back against an opponent that could easily destroy her.

The staff though, that still a bit of a surprise. It would’ve been more of one had Felicitas not already realized that the assassins weren’t actually here to assassinate her. Because you couldn’t kill an Immortal with a weapon without a bladed edge, no matter how good you wielded it, so what was the point?

In this case, it may be that her teacher didn’t want her trying to hold back with a weapon that could, potentially, decapitate an Immortal anyway. But either way the woman simply wasn't good enough for her to be much trouble to the ancient Immortal. Far more concerning was the other woman who was still hanging back.

**CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!**

Seeing the disarmed archer staggering to his feet on the other side of the couch drew Felicitas’ attention, and she sighed. Already aggravated and with the power of her Quickening still buzzing beneath her skin—practically begging to be used—her next move was too easy, though she at least managed to hold back enough for it to only be a shove of power instead of a pulse of pure energy.

**SMASH!**

It sent the other woman over the couch to crash into the other warrior and the pair of them slid several feet across the floor to crash into the legs’ of her dining room table, which immediately collapsed on them.

But neither one was burnt by the lightning that would be all too easy to throw right now, like some sort of Sith from *Star Wars*. A neat trick she’d mastered centuries before George Lucas was born, but even before his movies tied it to evil overlords it was the type of power she was always hesitant
to use to its fullest. Let alone on those that would report back to her deadliest student that she had yet another trick she hadn’t taught him—not that that should ever come as a surprise to him.

“Ay-Ay-Ay!”

It was, however, enough to finally make Nyssa attack. She was noticeably more skilled than all of the mortals—not surprisingly, since Ra’s al Ghul had raised her as his Heir and therefore Mazin would’ve made sure she could fight—but the war cry was, again, out of place. It belonged on an episode of *Xena*, not falling from an actual ninja’s lips as they attacked.

*CLANG-CLANG!*

*CLANG! CLANG!*

*CLANG-CLANG!*

Felicitas was surprised again when the blonde woman came back into the fight only a moment later.

The other conscious League-member was still stuck under the dining room table, perhaps knocked out.

But the other blonde woman was up again—her mask still in place, but her hair now visible because her cloak had been thrown back by either the blast or the resulting fall. She flew at the Immortal with near reckless abandon that went some way towards explaining why she was even here at all. And all but confirmed Felicitas’ assumption as to why the other blonde was fighting with a staff instead of the sword on her back.

At her interruption, Nyssa tried to back away again, but Felicitas followed, moving between both their attacks and twisting them to her advantage. It was, again, easier than it should’ve been. Mazin's daughter was far from her equal after not even three decades of life and training, but she was also distracted by the blonde woman.

And still, it was all too clear that both of them weren't actually *trying* to even hurt Felicitas. At this point even that couldn’t be more obvious, even if Nyssa was better at pretending she wanted her blows to connect with something other than one of the swords the Immortal was wielding.

*CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!*
They were lucky that it was rare for Felicitas to not hold back in a fight. It’d always driven Methos up wall as he tried to make her recognize that holding back at the wrong moment could spell her permanent end. But even rarer were the occasions that she actually didn’t want to hold back, at least until she’d made the conscious decision that her opponent—or opponents—had to die and therefore she had to kill them. This, thankfully, wasn’t one of those times.

Because while Felicitas could recognize that the blonde who was trying to help Nyssa now was undoubtedly somewhat new to the League, all the other men—and Nyssa al Ghul herself—were not. And they were holding back, all of them. Not quite like she was, no, but all of those men were members of the Heir’s Elite Guard. The not-yet-Immortal Heir’s Elite Guard.

At least one of them should’ve landed a blow at some point. Maybe just a scrape, or a bruise that’d fade almost as soon as it'd landed, but something that’d prove their skills weren’t completely negligible next to her own. Yet even when their weapons were whirring and fists were flying, she hadn’t really had to deflect them at all. They weren’t really trying, so she couldn’t kill them anymore than she could kill the two women she was fighting now.

Sure, she was pissed and wanted to know what hell was going on here, but Felicitas had learned a long time ago that emotions had no place in a fight. Only coldness did.

Cold logic. Cold strategy. Cold skills.

Or at least as little left to luck as one could possibly allow.

It was perhaps the most enduring of all Methos’s many lessons, even if she could only really apply it to fight—not most everyday life like he would prefer.

*CLANG! CLANG!*  
*CLANG! CLANG!*  
*CLANG! CLANG!*

Thankfully, she didn’t have to.

It took Felicitas several stretched seconds of dancing around and between the pair—still with a peripheral eye on the archer that apparently couldn’t get out from under her broken table—before she was able to catch the other blonde up and momentarily deflect Mazin’s daughter at the same time. That moment was all she needed to seize the staff and slam it straight into its owner’s head.

*Slam!*  
*Thud!*

That blow stunned the girl, and the ancient easily yanked the staff out of her hands, tossing it away as she pushed the dazed warrior at Nyssa in the same move. Only to blink again when the Heir of the Demon caught the other female warrior and steadied her, instead of simply avoiding her falling form.

Nyssa actually caught her and gave her a visible once-over as she made sure the blonde kept her feet before she went on the offensive again.

Interesting.

*CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!*
Now Nyssa’s moves were more forceful, and had gained some speed, but Felicitas still managed to send the blonde into the couch with a kick to the head that’d keep her there for a little while.

Yes, Nyssa definitely didn’t like the blonde woman being hurt, but Felicitas wasn’t inclined to test just how good the Pre-Immortal was when she could already see that one of the other assassins was starting to stir and the man under the heavy dining room table was moving again and might find his way out soon. So she seized the next opening she saw: sweeping Nyssa’s feet out from under her and knocking her sword away as she fell to the floor hard.

Mazin’s daughter rolled away with the fall, but only made it to her knees before the edge of Felicitas’ sword at her throat stopped her.

And the switch had been flipped: every conscious assassin froze.

The surprising one then was, again, the other blonde woman. Felicitas hadn’t been holding back all that much with the kick to her face, but still the girl had started to rise—until she saw the strongly implied threat to Nyssa al Ghul’s life. The only other conscious assassins were the archer that’d just come to and the other one that was still struggling with the table. But all three knew better than to move and risk their leader’s daughter’s life—especially on an assignment when they apparently weren’t even supposed to kill, or even harm, their target.

Felicity finally frowned down at the dark beauty whose fine features were too perfect a blend of the parents she couldn’t claim biologically according to everything any Immortal had ever known about Immortality. "I never would've expected the Demon’s daughter to be a fool."

Nyssa lifted her chin regally, heedless of the fact that she was exposing the one part of her body where her First Death could also be her final one. "My father shall be pleased."
The ancient didn't look around at all the groaning, bloody and partially broken bodies littering her living room. None of them should be dead, but the other woman was the only one in any shape to stand soon and she'd frozen when she saw the Demon's Heir was disarmed and held at sword point. The few others who were still conscious wouldn't be getting up very fast, or soon either. So the Pre-Immortal that was smiling slightly with a sword at her throat, but no incapacitating injuries, was still the biggest threat.

"Should he?" Felicity tilted her head slightly, but not enough to move any of her would-be attackers out of at least her peripheral vision. "He always did have a strange sense of humor, but I'm really not seeing the funny here. And last I checked, he disliked reports of failure."

Felicitas had tried to teach him some of the values of forgiveness, but it didn’t come any easier to him than mercy. He’d learned both, because he’d been entirely determined to, but it’d taken too long for her to simply forget how he’d struggled with it. How he sometimes still struggled with it, and likely always would. A man forged in the fires of war would always carry at least the memory of that heat that'd melted and melded them into a warrior. Peace couldn't be found without compromise, and that was a balance that required at least a little forgiveness, mercy, or both. But that didn't mean it came easily to warriors, even those that became leaders. Especially those that became leaders.

"He does. Yet this is no failure, Honored One," the princess of assassins shook her head with the small fraction of space the blade by her throat allowed. "Only a test, which you certainly have passed." She cocked her head to the side, still supremely unconcerned by her being on the floor only a step away from having her throat cut, or two moves from her beheading. "Your skills have not diminished with time at all. Why then did you allow a mere novice to harm you?"

At that, Felicitas scowled, but stepped back and rested the flat of the blade across one palm as she watched the young woman. "Explain," she demanded, instead of deigning to answer herself.

To which Nyssa nodded with a precise near-bow of her head, rising smoothly to her feet as she did. “My father told me many tales of you when I was a small girl, honored one,” she murmured, and wasn’t quite able to keep the nostalgia of girlhood memories she held dear out of her otherwise serene voice. “It was you who first taught him how to block bullets with bracers, as the Amazons do. And you who refused to do so until he could catch all arrows, bolts and blades with ease. As the League teaches our initiates to this day and will continue far into our future.”

"I did," the ancient agreed, not letting herself look at either of the men she'd stabbed with each arrow she'd caught.

"Why then did you allow the vengeance blind fool to harm you?" Nyssa asked again, turning just enough to offer her arm to help the only female in her entourage stand.
Felicitas held her dark gaze for a moment before she sighed and side stepped so she could lean back against the arm of her now battered but mostly unmoved sofa. "My reasons are complicated, but they are also my own. Your father has never presumed he had any right to them. Has only a few decades diminished his wisdom so much?"

That, at least, managed to faze the Demon's Heir. She swallowed so slightly it was just barely visible as she shook her head from side to side. "No, Honored One. All offense given here tonight is mine alone, and I must ask you to accept my apologies." Then she sank to her knees with all the grace a lifetime of relentless training instilled.

A mortal girl who'd mastered the computer sciences just a few short years ago in a modern college wouldn't have any idea how to react to anyone kneeling before them, but that girl wouldn't have the martial skill to subdue most, if any of the warriors here either. And Felicitas of Carthage had sat on several other thrones since she'd had to leave the one her mother made for her behind: with warriors, defeated leaders—people of all professions and backgrounds, really—kneeling at her feet when the times called for it. So she waited several moments, silently studying the top of the Pre-Immortal's head while the few warriors who were still conscious—the man who'd finally escaped her table and the blonde woman whom Nyssa al Ghul was so protective of—knelt with her. Not too intently, but enough to notice again that Nyssa's hair were the exact same shade and texture as Amina Raatko, who'd been the Demon's Bride, and then his wife for only a short few years before her mortality claimed her far too soon.

But the weighty silence that enveloped the room once all of the conscious assassins were on their knees wasn't the time or place for such thoughts. So, after another pointed pause, Felicitas finally asked the questions she'd known she had to even before she'd stepped back from the fatal blows the now kneeling woman couldn't have easily avoided. "Why then? Why this? Why now?"

"I was—"

"Look at me, Nyssa." Felicity cut her off, the command coming to her lips without thought when the girl's eyes didn't rise from the floor as she started to speak. The Immortal recognized it for the act of total submission that it was. Submission and trust, the likes of which a near stranger shouldn't ever imagine owing to another, but situations like this could breed it. And the weight of authority that the realization always provoked still felt like a burden to which very, very few things could compare. Even to a woman that'd worn a crown well before most girls in this era age would need a bra.

Nyssa obeyed her command immediately, though she had to know the saying about one's eyes being windows to the soul had always held at least a little truth. The honest emotions swirling in her gaze made her words easier to believe. "I was worried, honored one. Were you to pass into
That lined up with Mazin's personal beliefs about protecting the precious few ancient Immortals that were still walking the world. He'd always hated The Game almost as much as his teacher did. For his own reason rather than her own, not all of which were the same. But Mazin's beliefs had, of course, become part of the League's Code: as was the will of 'Ra's al Ghul.' That was why they called Felicitas: an 'honored one' in any language she chose to speak.

Obviously the girl he called his daughter—the Pre-Immortal who looked like she could very well be his by blood if that were possible—held that belief very dear.

Felicitas moved her head from side to side slowly, deliberately. "Your actions tonight would seem to contradict that sentiment."

The flicker in Nyssa's dark eyes made it clear she wanted to shake her head, or nod, or swallow again. But the grown woman who was strong enough to be called the Demon's Heir was also too disciplined to break eye contact before she'd been given leave to do so. "Apologies again, honored one. I had to know you could still defend yourself. The same method by which my father routinely tests himself seemed to be the best test I could design for his own teacher."

The blonde woman kneeling near Nyssa wasn't the only one there to react ever so slightly to that; she was only the most noticeable. The assassin kneeling now next to the table he'd been trapped under and the one that'd stirred and shifted to his knees not a whole minute ago did as well. None of them made any sound, of course, just a few very subtle shifts of shoulders that seemed loud in the silent disaster zone they'd made of her main room. Apparently Nyssa hadn't deigned to tell any of them exactly which ancient Immortal they were 'testing' tonight; and the bit about blocking bullets and catching arrows hadn't spelled it out quite so clearly.

Felicity found it almost amusing, but she didn't let that show as she shook her head. "Next time? Try talking." She frowned as she looked around her demolished living room, shaking her head again. "For my home's sake; and your own," she finished with a glance at all of the assassins that were still down—all only unconscious, but still with the injuries that'd put them there.

Unlike Mazin's daughter, after all, they were only mortal—it would take them a great deal of time to heal. Not that Nyssa al Ghul would heal any faster while her Quickening remained dormant in her continuing Pre-Immortal state.

"If five times the enemy's strength, attack them," Nyssa responded smoothly.
Felicity laughed shortly. "If weaker, be able to avoid them," she shook her head. "But attacking a superior foe with nonlethal—no, not even injurious force—and expecting any outcome other than defeat is foolish, child." She shook her head. "You're lucky I realized this wasn't real so soon. Otherwise most of your men would be dead now."

"Yes, honored one," the Heir to the Demon bowed her head in acknowledgment, but maintained eye contact as she went on. "It is a sacrifice my father would think worth making in your defense."

Unfortunately, his daughter was probably right. He would.

Felicity sighed, finally tossing the staff she'd chosen back to its owner, then moved over to her half-destroyed couch and dropped down into it, resting the sword in her hand across her lap and surveying the young woman whose dark eyes were almost able to hide the admiration in them. Almost, but not quite. She shook her head, "If that's true, then it's only because your father is only a few centuries older than you, young one."

Nyssa shook her head, "There is no dishonor here, honored one. A true test of skill cannot be had without some injuries." She nodded. "My father would have told me to expect this; a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease."

Felicity snorted, "Yes, your father is one of Sun Tzu's many self-taught fans."

"Self-taught?" the younger woman shook her head again. "My father has never denied that nearly everything he learned worth knowing came from you, honored one."

"And while Sun Tzu was one of my many teachers, I am not him. Any more than your father is." Felicitas replied easily. Then she rose from her ruined couch and offered her hand to the still kneeling group's leader, pulling her to her feet when she accepted the help with a warrior's grasp. "I trust that all of this shall be taken care of in short order," she said as she released her hold immediately.

Nyssa immediately bowed, "Of course, honored one."

Felicity nodded and turned towards her still open front door, returning her remaining sword to its sheath on the wall as she went by.
It was a show of trust her own teacher would chastise her for. After thousands of years to get used to her, it would’ve still earned her a frown at the very least. But then that was one of the main differences between Felicitas and Methos—while she didn’t want to die as a general rule, she also didn’t want to go through her eternal life not trusting people. So she had to give them the chances that both her brothers probably wouldn’t risk: especially on each other.

So her senses stayed on high-alert as she heard the Heir to the Demon re-sheathing her sword and all of the other conscious warriors also accepting the silent permission to rise behind her. But she focused on getting to her front door and the alarm controls there, only listening with half an ear as Mazin’s daughter issued a few swift commands before she followed behind her.

Felicity closed the front door and glanced back towards her back door, but she didn’t need to say anything before the conscious assassin nearest to it—the one that’d been stuck under the table—had helpfully closed it. Then she had to frown as it wouldn’t allow itself to be reset, and glanced around before her eyes fell on the window that some of the assassins had so carefully pried open not long before.

The two conscious men were already moving towards it, obviously having realized that it was the first repair that’d need to be made. Until it was, she couldn’t reset the security system. So they’d better work fast: even if Digg shouldn’t be calling again for closer to ten than five minutes, that wouldn’t necessarily keep Oliver from realizing something was wrong. He did have the app to check the electronic security status of her home remotely after all—he’d insisted on it and she hadn’t had the heart to deny him. Damn it.

“The window will be fixed momentarily, honored one,” Mazin’s daughter met her gaze evenly as she turned around, though her stance wasn’t quite as proud as it’d been when they’d first met at Verdant. The defeat she’d expected—and even wanted—had made something about her respectful attitude deeper. It was the respect of the warrior, rather than the admiration of the girl she’d once been. But she still managed the next question she wanted to ask. "And what of Helena Bertinelli?"

"She’s left Starling City," Felicity said in return, fully expecting the immediate nod that she got.

"As you wished, she should be in Nanda Parbat by now, yes." Nyssa shook her head. "What she shall do there, I cannot say."

"And she doesn't know about me," Felicity clarified, but again she wasn't actually asking.
Mazin was so painstakingly precise when she'd first met him, and while he may have past her teachings on to many she didn't doubt that his own lessons included the level of ruthlessness that'd always made Methos a little wary of him. This ‘test’ his daughter had designed proved that. So Felicity didn’t doubt the Demon's daughter had followed her specifications to the letter once she accepted the task. Regardless of her plan’s execution tonight.

"She did ask if it was her father or Oliver Queen who called us, as you expected. She received neither denial nor confirmation of either and shall remain disappointed so long as she expects an answer." Nyssa reported promptly. Then she paused, curiosity clear in her eyes.

Felicity chuckled. "Ask your question, Nyssa."

The assassin considered her words for a moment, and then said carefully, "I do not understand the purpose of this manipulation, honored one." She shook her head slowly. "Her limited skill set and injurious inaccuracy aside: the woman’s objective is not without merit."

"Her father's death at all costs," Felicity shook her head. "If we're ignoring the collateral damage she doesn't care about, why shouldn't we ignore who and what her father was as well? His criminal organization is virtually nonexistent now, and his testimony against other crime families will do more damage there than his death ever could. Society will benefit the most from the reduction in crime that can bring. Perhaps justice isn’t as satisfying as vengeance, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t right."

"That is likely," Nyssa agreed so slowly she clearly thought it through first. "It isn't what the girl wants."

"No, it's not." Felicity nodded, walking back over to her living room and sitting down in the armchair that hadn’t gotten demolished in the crossfire. She gestured to the end of the couch that didn’t have an arrow in it, silently telling the younger woman to sit while the other warriors all kept working with silent efficiency around them. “What she wants is her fiancé back and what she sees as her father's betrayal undone. But killing him won’t bring about either end. That's the catch with vengeance. What’s done cannot be undone."

Nyssa frowned. "But vengeance can be justice."

Felicity studied her a moment, then shook her head. "There are times when it's the only option available to us, yes," the ancient sighed. "But those times aren't as common as you might think."
The much younger woman's dark brows drew together. "You've killed other Immortals in vengeance before."

"No. I haven't," Felicity immediately denied. "There have been times when the death of a friend has led to me fighting their killer, but I don't seek out headhunters without good reason. Any more than your father does."

That wasn't entirely true, she knew. If Methos allowed her to challenge Cassandra millennia ago, back when the witch had committed the first of many horrific crimes going back through the ages: her death would've been called justice. By today's standards it would be called murder: vengeance, not justice.

Even as Queen of Carthage, Felicitas hadn't liked condemning most criminals to die. Frequently she had to be talked into it when it was necessary. However she would've called killing Cassandra justice without a moment's thought then, and so, too, would all of Carthage and her allies. History, however, didn't believe in an eye for an eye or death dealt out as justice without even the semblance of a trial. All the same, it was the only real justice that could've been available to Felicitas back then—and the many more lives Cassandra had chosen to ruin since would perhaps make most historians say in retrospect that the madwoman should've been hunted down back then. But hindsight isn't always perfect, and that long history didn't seem to be passing through the young Pre-Immortal's head as she watched the ancient curiously.

"But you do seek them out." Nyssa clarified.

"Some of them. Yes. When it's necessary," Felicity acknowledged. "A headhunter who has killed one friend might go after another next. Anyone who believes they should kill simply because they can is a threat to everyone." The ancient shook her head, "But the debatable politics of The Game aren't at work here at all. Helena Bertinelli is a mortal woman. A daughter driven mad by her grief, in too much pain to realize that taking her revenge and killing her father will ultimately just mean she's as alone in the world as she felt already, only she has only herself to blame. It won't bring her closure. And it wouldn't be justice by society's standards today."

"Yet you have seen many societies rise and fall, honored one."

"I have."

"You have had hands in both events as well."
"Not in a rather long time, really. Not directly," Felicity shook her head again. "The more time passes, the more I wonder how much say any ancient should have in modern times. It wasn't all that long ago that an especially monstrous ancient wanted to wipe out millions with a weapon of mass destruction just because it was possible."

"Which, I understand, al Mawte dealt with," Nyssa nodded. "My father was monitoring the situation at the time, but chose not to become involved, just as you did, I believe?"

Felicity grimaced. "'Chose' isn't an accurate word for me then. Methos, and your father for that matter, made sure I wasn't aware of the problem before its resolution." She chuckled. "A tactic my brother has long favored, but hasn't always been able to employ. Usually your father chooses to assist me regardless, but I can't say I was surprised he followed Methos’ lead then, considering the enemies he was facing."

Cassandra was a nightmare that would continue to haunt Felicitas even after her horrible head finally fell. But Methos... well, what he did to Cassandra would undoubtedly always number among his regrets right alongside the blame he placed upon himself for what the madwoman had later done in Carthage, and in all the places and to all the people thereafter.

But the Four Horsemen had been the ghosts from Methos’ ancient past that’d still drawn breath until only a few decades back. Ghosts that he’d hated and dreaded for ages. It didn't surprise her, retrospectively, that he’d chosen to surprise Felicitas and little Donna with an all-expenses paid trip to Australia—practically on the others side of the world from the fearsome foursome at the time, and a trip Donna had wanted to take.

That Felicitas had managed to get killed by a territorial kangaroo while she was down there wasn’t part of his plan, any more than her mild phobia of the beasts after she’d awoken. She would’ve chosen to shield Donna, regardless, and at least she could be relatively sure that result wasn’t at all deliberate. Unlike her fear of heights being a result of the many times he’d tossed her from very high places to prove she’d keep coming back and improve her situational awareness. Methos would’ve probably said she should’ve killed the kangaroo instead of letting it hit her: and that Donna would’ve been doubly safer. Truthfully, he was probably right, but Felicity didn’t like dealing out death anytime she could avoid it. That was why she’d never told him about it.

“But you didn’t come here to debate philosophy,” Felicity shook her head, and raised an eyebrow. “I trust your concerns are satisfied?” she waited patiently while the younger woman surveyed the repairs her warriors had already managed. Though the sight of the window already fixed had her up and headed back to the front door again, while the younger woman followed a respectful step behind her.

The League had helped design some of this house’s more fascinating features, so the fact that
they’d rolled back the rug and opened the trapdoor a few feet away from her couch as soon as
they’d gotten all of their fallen friends out to the way hadn’t surprised Felicity. That they had all
come in through the open doors and the one window they’d carefully pried open—though she still
didn’t get why they’d wasted time on that instead of coming through one of the doors, too—meant
they didn’t need to work too hard to put everything back together quickly. Even the dining room
table looked almost fixed already, though she’d have to check that repair before she’d feel
comfortable eating there. Mostly all that was left to do right not was remove the furniture that
would need to be replaced. Though the trio of conscious fighters Nyssa still had to command was
currently working on hunting down all of the rock collection she’d made the mistake of tossing at
one of them. The dedicated efficiency didn’t surprise her at all, despite the fact that the warriors
looked a bit ridiculous crawling around picking up rocks in all their dark armor.

“I’m afraid not, honored one,” Nyssa replied quietly, drawing the ancient’s gaze—and another
arched eyebrow—back to her.

“Oh?”

“The matter of Al Sahir remains,” the Pre-Immortal pointed out.

That made Felicity sighed. “That is not something we can resolve tonight, Nyssa.”

“Were I to bid Al Sahir return to Nanda Parbat, he would not dare refuse.”

“It’s not that simple, child,” Felicity shook her head.

“It can be.” Nyssa insisted as her warriors finally went to the demolished couch.

As the men picked it up, the other blonde woman pressed the button to temporarily disengage the
alarm at the back door and held it open then, for them to maneuver the large piece of furniture out.

“No. It can’t.” The ancient murmured as she glanced around, not really amazed at how much better
everything looked already. All they had left to do was carry their wounded out, though Mazin’s
daughter may make them clean, too. Felicity couldn't help but frown at the empty center of her
living room, "You know, I really liked that couch," she sighed.

The slight hesitation before Nyssa's reply didn't surprise her anymore than the eventual answer.
"Apologies again, honored one. We shall replace it—"

"Don't bother," the ancient cut her off, shaking her head when she met the younger woman's gaze. "I'm too picky about that sort of thing. I'll have to find another one myself."

It wasn’t like they could find the exact same one and get it back here before Oliver finished his patrol. Not without at least stealing it; and the ancient had never felt any great need for thievery.

Nyssa was quicker to respond this time, "We can find the same—"

"They're never exactly the same, Nyssa," Felicity cut her off calmly, shaking her head again. "Nothing ever is. Even these days."

Mass-production had made many things much more similar, of course, but Felicitas had never quite gotten the hang of appreciating such things. Not when it was sometimes the differences that helped her keep herself in the present more so than the past. Not when sometimes it was the smallest of those reminders of times long gone by that kept her from feeling too much like she should've become dust long ago...

"Just finish cleaning everything up," Felicitas clarified with a sigh, and then grimaced as she looked at the clock. "I only have four minutes to get my security all the way up and running again."

"Honored One?" the uncertainty should sound strange in such an obviously accomplished assassin's voice, but compared to the ancient she was questioning Nyssa al Ghul would probably always seem young. And now she seemed very, very young.

"I'm only a tech genius with an interesting boyfriend, remember?" Felicitas reminded her, her grimace turning to a smile as both of the other women scoffed. Then she shook her head and continued more sternly. "Even if I’m supposed to be some sort of executive-in-training now, too. So long as my friends in this life need to believe that, that is all I can be, and things like this," she gestured to the room around them, though most of the damage was well and truly gone. "Can't Happen. Again." She locked gazes with Mazin's daughter again, not looking away even though she really did need to worry about Digg sending Oliver over here now. If only to check on why the cameras hadn’t come back on when the power wasn’t out anymore. The two systems did work in tandem, after all, but she’d have to go into the safe-room to bring the cameras back up—and she couldn’t do that until after all of the assassins left.
Fortunately the girl bowed her head more quickly this time. "Of course, honored one."

"We never touched the system," the other woman spoke up for the first time, and her blue eyes looked a little surprised at herself as she went on. "Shouldn’t be a problem bringing it back on. Unless they can watch the cameras?"

Nyssa, on the other hand, looked more indulgent than surprised, so it was likely this was in-character for the young woman that was so protective of a warrior with a lifetime more combat experience than herself.

“Got it in one.” Felicity nodded, and then sighed. “My friends are a bit protective, and everything with the Huntress only made them worse. It’s not like I can just tell them she’s not a problem anymore. Not without explaining why.”

“They would not be good friends if they did not worry, honored one.” Nyssa observed.

“True.” The ancient nodded, but her gaze didn’t leave the blonde whose face was still half-hidden by her League mask. “You’re new to the League?”

She didn’t need to phrase it as a question when she knew it was true, but she also knew it’d sound better to the young warrior with that intonation.

“Taer al-Usfar joined us only three years ago, honored one,” the Heir to the Demon confirmed, continuing even though the ancient’s eyes stayed on the other blonde. “She completed her traditional training a year ago.”

Felicity nodded in understanding, smiling slightly when the other pair of blue eyes still held her own. “You still have a lot to learn, but some things only time can teach us. That you are here now, however, speaks very highly of your character.”

“Thank you,” the blonde started to bow only her head, but then followed through with a full bow. “Honored One.”

“Felicity, please,” Felicity told her as she watched other blonde straighten again. The mortal looked like she wasn’t sure what to think about all of this, because she undoubtedly wasn’t, but there was a definite pleased look in Nyssa’s eyes. Neither reaction was a surprise to the ancient, so
she ignored them as she nodded toward the door. “Your friends are back.”

Taer al-Usfar immediately went to open the door for her comrades again, while the Immortal met Mazin’s daughter’s gaze once more.

“The situation regarding Al Sahir demands Ra’s al Ghul’s direct attention, Nyssa. You do not have the authority, even as Heir, to handle it for him.”

That very quickly turned the Demon’s daughter’s slight smile into a small, unhappy frown as all pleasure vanished from her dark-eyes. She didn’t bother with further arguing, though, so she knew it was true.

Felicity stayed silent as she watched the warriors carefully check each of their fallen comrades over before moving them outside.

Taer al-Usfar stayed at the door all the while, because someone had to and the men could move the deadweight of their friends more easily than she could. But they obviously weren’t taking any of the fallen assassins far once they got outside—they were simply returning too quickly for that not to be the case. Then again, if they were smart they dropped the couch outside and brought a vehicle that could take it and all of them a lot closer before they came back. As soon as she’d closed the door behind the last of them, the other blonde headed back for the broom that she’d been sweeping the kitchen with and started making her way quickly through the living room.

The remaining assassins could leave any time now—and Nyssa al Ghul wouldn’t receive a different response from Felicity no matter how long she waited. Though the sheer stubbornness and determination she was displaying were both characteristics that could’ve come from Mazin by blood just as much as their matching eyes…

“The best victories are won without fighting, niece,” Felicity told her, meeting that dark gaze again. “And the fight that may need to be fought here would be complicated even if Al Sahir wasn’t free from his oaths to the League. But he was, and Ra’s al Ghul himself released him, didn’t he?”

It had to have been Mazin. Malcolm Merlyn hadn’t been absent for any prolonged period of time after he came back to Starling City when Tommy was still a boy, following a two year absence after his wife’s murder. Nyssa, too, would have been only a child then, too, and as far as Felicity knew Ra’s al Ghul had never named another his Heir before her. So only even if Mazin allowed his chosen Heir that kind of authority now, he was still the only one that could’ve given his liegeman permission to leave the League and return home years ago…
“He did,” Nyssa acknowledged. “As Heir to the Demon, I have the right to release my father’s vassals in his name; that authority does come from Ra’s al Ghul himself.”

“And you were not the one to release Al Sahir.”

“No, honored one,” Nyssa agreed, that subtle air of unhappiness still a strong aura around her.

Felicity only nodded. “That’s what it all comes back to, Nyssa. Authority. And honor.” She shook her head. “Honor is what your father’s authority stems from—he cannot take back his word without reason, not without diminishing his honor in the process.”

The blonde had finished with the dining room and swept the tidy pile of dust and tiny debris into the dustpan, dumping it into the trash before she headed for the other side of the living room.

“I understand, honored one,” Nyssa finally said with a weary sigh that didn’t hide her unhappiness at all.

“No you don’t, not really.” Felicity offered her a kind smile. “You want everything to be much simpler than that, but life so rarely is. That you want to understand that—to recognize that, is enough.” She sighed again then. “Now, I’m tired. And you, my dear niece, have a long journey ahead of you tonight.”

“Of course, ’Ama,” Nyssa bowed her head again; acknowledging the gentler order that the ancient expected her to leave Starling City and go home. “We will leave you to your rest.” She looked around as she turned towards the door. “I trust the repairs meet with your approval?”

“Its fine,” Felicity nodded towards Taer al-Usfar, giving both women a small smile. “Have a safe journey, ladies.”

Fortunately Oliver hadn’t come inside when he’d walked her to her door tonight, he’d had to get back on his bike and head out to handle something down by the docks so he’d just made sure she was safely inside—and done a quick run around her house to make sure there were no signs of the Huntress around then—before he’d headed back to his bike and out into the night again. So she could always say she’d had someone come by to get rid of her couch while she was at work. He wouldn’t like that she’d let some strangers into her newly ‘secure’ house, and would probably say she should’ve told him so he and/or Digg could’ve come over to supervise, but better that than
trying to babble her way through why there was swipes made by swords and holes made by arrows in it…

Felicity closed the door behind the last two League members to finally leave her home for the night, heading back for her bedroom and the door to the safe-room there. She’d have to wait a minute more before she could safely reset the cameras, but at least if she could bring the cameras back up when Digg called he shouldn’t ask too many more questions if Felicity was already yawning, which she would be because she could already sense the weighty load of adrenaline crash wasn’t far off at all.

At least the League should be out of her hair for a few more days at this point. Mazin would undoubtedly come to her next: sooner rather than later, but he’d have his vassals out researching everything he could first.

Helena Bertinelli would not be back anytime soon. Assuming she was even able accept the fact that she had no choice but to accept the League’s offer of training if she ever wanted to leave the dungeons of Nanda Parbat. When she did realize that and accept, it’d be months or even years before she completed that training. While the physical aspect of it might not be far beyond her, the sheer discipline and honor that made up the backbone of Mazin’s organization would take her far longer to appreciate. If she ever got that far, the oath she’d have to swear to Ra’s al Ghul should keep her far from Felicitas’ home for the rest of her life…

Not a kindness, perhaps, but more merciful by far than a far too early death. And in time the purpose the League could give her might even help young Helena find her way in the world once again.

While the rest of them just tried to figure out every other problem that Starling City had in spades…

Chapter End Notes

A/n: So, there we have one of my favorite scenes so far. I’m not sure if anyone will have been expecting it, but I feel like it fits. Hopefully it wasn’t too over the top? I tried to keep it fairly in line with what we’ve seen so far—and yes, I know that seeing Sara as the novice fighter from Felicity’s POV may seem strange, but in this universe she really is. If you go back to S2 it’s really noticeable: the change between S2 flashbacks & S2 present. Sure, she’s been in the League a few years by now, but Felicity’s been fighting for thousands of years! …Was that too defensive? *sigh* I don’t know, I think it fits. I adore Sara, and she’s gotten even better in Legends of Tomorrow, but in S2 they seemed to alternate between her being a master-assassin who was fully trained, etc. and still a newbie
sometimes. My mental explanation for that is that she had already been training with the LOA since the end of the S2 flashbacks at best, which would be about 4 years. Compared to Felicitas who’s been training and fighting for thousands of years AND has trained more than one student—Mazin/Ra’s al Ghul among them—I thought it was a distinction that made sense.

And, once again, I made a huge error while editing in that I somehow ended up with multiple versions of this scene that I then needed to combine. I think I managed to smooth the whole thing out, but if anything flies out at you, please let me know. I’m going to eventually revise the whole story once it’s finally done, but I’m trying to not let myself get too bogged down in editing before then; otherwise we might have to wait a few more months between updates and I did promise I’d try to avoid that!

Even so, my goal was to update over a week ago, but I managed to fall and twist my knee pretty badly the Sunday before that, so fan fiction revising got shelved for that weekend/week, and even though I took a few unexpected days off from work because of it, I really wasn’t in the right headspace for writing, let alone revising. Then (yes AND THEN), this past weekend my furnace decided to die. Not go out: it was completely I’m-ready-to-be-yanked-out-of-the-house-and-be-buried-dead. So I was stuck in my cold house for a few days, till I felt I could go back to work on crutches. Where my co-workers promptly told me I should take a few more days, but the office had heat so I wanted to roll around in my computer chair all over the place. Actually it worked pretty well: save for the one stupid step they decided to put in the office layout (into the break room, no less), I could roll everywhere in the office, which was kind of fun. The whole experience gave me some unpleasant flashbacks to when I hurt my foot a few years ago and was laid up for several months, but thankfully my knee healed a whole lot faster than my heel did. It still twinges occasionally, and stairs are still a little intimidating, but it’s safe to say I’m on the end. Plus we had the plumber and electrician finally finish installing and turning on the new furnace, so the house isn’t cold anymore, too!

And so, tonight, I’m not in pain anymore, the house is warm, and I think this chapter is ready for posting… I may’ve missed something, of course, since it was another one I was kind of revising in three different places—I have to stop that—but I still want to post it tonight. Otherwise my note about it only taking a month won’t be true, so…

Hope you liked it?
Comments, suggestions, etc. would be wonderful! Hint! Hint! ;-)
The Listener

Chapter Notes

Well, tax season is finally over, thank god! And it only took me a little over a week to recover from it and start writing again. A minor miracle, I think, considering everything else my family managed to cram into the same timeframe. Sticking even a long weekend that’s not particular restful into an already stressful time of year’s not a great idea, though it was fun. In the future I may need to pay more attention to everyone else’s medical appointments, too—sticking several of them into the same week is just asking for trouble.

But, all the same, this scene is finally done. So, without further ado, here’s what Digg was doing while waiting for Felicity’s security system to come back online again. You know, while Nyssa, Sara, and a few other members of the L.O.A were destroying Felicity’s poor living room? Enjoy! ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Diggle’s P.O.V.

John Diggle didn’t let himself frown at the still blank boxes being displayed on one of the monitors. He should be seeing several different views from Felicity’s electronically-secured home there by now.

It’d already been longer than he’d expected for Felicity to fix the problem, so that frown wanted to come out. But then again, it was possible that he and Oliver were both getting more than a little spoiled by their tech genius.

Felicity had given him an estimated time of fifteen minutes, and she wouldn’t have said that if she couldn’t meet it, but a part of him had still kind of expected the problem to be fixed almost right away. She’d said fifteen minutes though, and it’d barely been five just now.

And John was supposed to be paying more attention to ‘Oliver doing stupid things’ right now. Although the archer hadn’t jumped off any rooftops yet tonight, and the worst odds he’d given himself so far had been three-to-one, which was almost a cake-walk for the vigilante.

But to be fair to Felicity, too, John understood why she hadn’t wanted Oliver to know there was a problem right now. Like the genius, John didn’t doubt Oliver’s over-protectiveness was still massively in overdrive. He didn’t doubt his own was, too, so he was sympathetic to both of them. And they all knew that at even the slightest sign of anything—not just the T-mobile bitch with a
crossbow or the other archer: anything—their vigilante would be speeding straight back to Felicity’s house. Maybe even through her door again.

Felicity had already had a fight on her hands earlier tonight getting her boyfriend to accept that he needed Digg on the comms as potential back-up much more than she needed him at her house as a potential but probably not necessary bodyguard. If there was one thing that that couple definitely had in common, though, it was their sheer stubbornness. Scary thought when you took it a step forward and considered the two of them together and agreeing on something. Could give the term “power couple” a very literal meaning if they stared to pool all the stubbornness and drive between them…

Oliver probably would not have ever admitted defeat this evening if Felicity shown them that the ‘Arrow Cave’ system already monitored her street. Through a home security system that was surprisingly very well-done in that it really did cover every angle of the property, something some professional companies struggled to manage at times. That Felicity had the right technology was, of course, a lot less of a surprise.

It’d all been enough to convince John himself to weigh in, despite the fact that that was the closest the pair had come to a real argument as far as he’d seen so far. But it was also why the bodyguard couldn’t let himself frown at those little blank boxes that should be showing him predictable images of Felicity’s quiet neighborhood in the middle of the night. Because if he was frowning whenever the Arrow said something that required a response from him, the other man would hear it and he would want to know what was wrong. And while John Diggle was willing to weigh in with his opinion where it counted, he wasn’t a couples counselor and he was not about to start trying to be one with the archer and their tech genius.

Oliver hadn’t been stupid enough to ask Felicity to not take the night off when she’d asked for it—hell, he’d wanted her to take the break. And he knew they were better off with the Arrow back in play before the S.C.P.D—or the media, for that matter—might start to wonder if maybe he hadn’t just changed the color of his clothes to break the Huntress out last night. It was important that Helena Bertinelli be more closely tied to the Dark Archer than she was to the Arrow, especially after the other archer had rescued her in what was being recognized as a terrorist attack on the Starling City Police. Utterly unexpected and absolutely bizarre thought that’d definitely been, it could help them in the long run if it was handled right.

Yes, Digg was a bit on edge himself wondering when the Dark Archer would shoot his next arrow—and if it might be aimed at Oliver again, or at Felicity, or Diggle himself—but that was really all he cared about. He honestly wouldn’t be bothered by the S.C.P.D finding the Huntress’s cold corpse sometime soon. He’d sleep better—and Oliver’d hate to admit it, but he would, too. Felicity would probably hate it, but she’d still be better off…

Ping…
The soft sound from the far left computer was accompanied by a warning that someone had used the right password to open the door upstairs. When he glanced at that still-working security system, John did let himself to react to the sight of Tommy Merlyn on the camera: because the club’s manager was literally looking left and right before he ducked down the stairs and slammed the door behind him. It was something John had to roll his eyes at. Sure, that door should be much better hidden, but that man was not inconspicuous at all.

“Hey!” Tommy called as he hurried—all but stomping—down the stairs. “You’re here!”

“He’s out, and Felicity’s taking tonight off,” John shrugged not even trying to explain more than that. He’d honestly half-expected the other man would turn around and go back up into the nightclub again when he saw that it was Diggle, and not Felicity, who was sitting down here tonight.

Tommy slowed down a little after he’d bounded all the way down the stairs, but he didn’t stop. “Did he find the, uh…”

After what’d happened to him the other night, it wasn’t much of a surprise that he was asking questions—the surprise was still just that he was asking if of John Diggle. Might mean some of his intimidation factor had worn off when he’d wrapped the other man’s hand—maybe he should make sure he was beating one of the bags next time Verdant’s manager visited…

“Nope. No signs of the Huntress, or the other archer,” John replied calmly when the younger man trailed off. “He’s mostly out scaring drug dealers tonight. Stopped a mugging ’bout twenty minutes ago, and another on an hour before that. Maybe a few more later on. Might make sure a few drunks don’t drive till they’ve sobered up a bit, too.”

All exactly the sorts of crime that Oliver Queen had told his pseudo-bodyguard and partner-in-crime he wasn’t interested in tackling just a few short months ago. Except a lot had happened in those short months, not the least of which was that the archer had let someone in past all the scary, scarred walls he’d built around his heart. It’d been an interesting—almost miraculous—progression to watch, as it’d undoubtedly continue to be. Just like it’d been tonight when all the words the pair weren’t saying were as—or even more—important than what they weren’t saying to each other.

“That’s—uh—good,” Tommy answered awkwardly, not even remotely able to hide his discomfort. But at least he was trying to not be so openly disapproving of his friend anymore—small steps in the right direction, as Felicity had already said.
Then again, maybe it’d occurred to Tommy that it wasn’t just muggings and drunk driving that the vigilante might be stopping, too. John himself could understand being uncomfortable with thoughts of the would-be murderers and rapists that the vigilante had stopped more times than they cared to count when he wasn’t even looking for them. Now that the Arrow was actually randomly patrolling for the same crimes he’d once called just ‘symptoms of the cancer’ he’d undoubtedly find just as many more.

*That* was the real scary part. That the city’s crime rate had really gotten that bad—worse and worse with every passing year. Or it had been, according to the media, until ‘The-Man-in-the-Hood’ had started wearing that hood and shooting his arrows. It was an aspect of what they did didn’t bother John Diggle at all. But the fact that it was so necessary did and always would.

“Um, actually, I wanted to talk to you about Oliver,” Tommy said after almost a full minute of glancing at all the monitors John was also watching. Though, unlike the bodyguard he wasn’t listening to ‘Oliver do stupid things,’ as Felicity said, through the comms system. If he could hear the occasional sounds of fighting that the other man was listening to through the comm. device, he’d undoubtedly be even more awkward, but John couldn’t make himself put it on speaker.

“What about him, Mister Merlyn?” John answered noncommittally, because he couldn’t think of much else to say.

The other man coming down here to talk to Felicity he could understand. After all, she’d told him to do just that. And Felicity was a very, very good listener. It might be a little bit from a lifetime of trying to control that awkward tongue of hers, but it probably had a lot more to do with her huge heart. Sometimes it was easier to talk to a neutral party who could, in theory, offer unbiased opinions on your problems. But it always felt better to talk with someone who you knew genuinely cared, and Felicity did.

So why was Merlyn talking to *him*?

John just wasn’t sure how he should feel about the fact that the club manager seemed to think Felicity saying ‘come down here anytime’ also meant he could make a nuisance of himself even when she and Oliver weren’t here. But, then again, John did know he *might* be holding a little grudge over some of the disinherited billionaire’s heir’s more irritating moments in the past. Felicity hadn’t even heard of half of them.

“Tommy. Haven’t I told you to call me Tommy, already?” the younger man shook his head and didn’t wait for an answer, going on after a sigh. “Look, I know we got off on a wrong foot, but I really need your help here.”
Somehow that idea didn’t surprise John half as much as the fact that Tommy was talking to him in the first place, so he just looked at him and waited for him to go on.

And that made Tommy groan, “He’s gonna make the same mistake again.”

John considered him for a long second, then gave in. “And what mistake’s that?”

“He’s gonna screw it up with Felicity!” Tommy insisted, shaking his head sharply. “Just like he did with Laurel.”

Half a decade and at least a hundred harsh experiences between the two relationships made the ex-soldier pretty sure Oliver Queen had grown up somewhat from the boy that’d thought it’d be a good idea to runaway with his girlfriend’s baby sister. But he wasn’t sure the archer wasn’t still commitment shy to some extent: Felicity’s seemingly infinite patience—so easy to see even in these early days of their relationship—was what made John more sure the couple stood any chance of making it.

Tommy clearly didn’t agree. “We’ve gotta make sure he doesn’t screw this up.”

John could’ve pointed out that Laurel Lance was with Tommy now and that that was something he thought the man they were talking about did respect. But he didn’t think that was what had the man so on edge either. “He’s a grown man, Tommy,” the bodyguard pointed out unnecessarily, eyes going back to the little black boxes on one of the monitors again as he talked. “He can make his own mistakes.”

“Yeah, but do you really want him to mess up things with Felicity?” Tommy insisted. “’Cause I don’t think she’ll give him half as many chances as Laurel did.”

“She won’t,” John agreed easily. “He knows that.”

A grunt of pain that was too loud to be from anyone other than Oliver resounded through the comm. in his ear, making John suppress a wince. But the vigilante didn’t even deign to mention that he was fighting another punk, so he ignored it and kept more of his attention on the man in front of him. Minus keeping at least his peripheral vision fixed on the monitor that still wasn’t showing him all the security screens it was supposed to.
“Yeah, but if there’s a problem between them, won’t that make a Titanic-size mess of things down here, too?” Tommy tried.

John did actually think about that for a minute, then he shook his head. “Not really. Oliver might try avoiding her for a bit, but that just means he’d kill himself on the salmon ladder a little more than usual, or spend some more time under the hood.” He shrugged when the younger man looked thoughtful. “Either way, he won’t be able to not talk to her for long.”

“Yeah, but won’t she—”

“Nope,” John didn’t let him even asked that question. “Felicity’s a professional. And she wants to help this city. Whether she’s dating Oliver Queen or not.”

“But—”

“Believe me, you didn’t watch those two dance around each other for all the months it took him to get his head out of his ass,” the ex-soldier shrugged again. “And neither one of them is that selfish either.”

Tommy snorted. “Ollie always was that selfish…” he grimaced through a sigh then. “Even though he didn’t usually wanna be.”

“Maybe so,” John allowed with another shrug. “If that tabloids got anything at all right about him, he was definitely young and stupid back then. We all were at some point.”

When Moira Queen had first brought him on as bodyguard for her recently returned from the dead son, John had fallen for the spoiled rich kid act: hook, line and sinker. It was why he’d been so surprised when the bastard had pulled that first vanishing act on him. He’d grown up in Starling City, always in the shadow of the Queen and Merlyn empires, which really were thought of like royalty in this city and only partially because of the surname. There was always a certain amount of public interest in them, and the two heirs hadn’t disappointed the paparazzi: appearing on the covers of the rags by check out in the grocery store for years, before the sinking of The Queen’s Gambit had shocked the city. Sure, John had rationalized that becoming a real-life Robinson Crusoe might’ve changed the kid a bit, but he hadn’t been at all ready for his Houdini acts. That’s why it’d taken him a few weeks to wrap his head around the fact that he was going to have to really work to earn his paycheck… until the vigilante saved his life and revealed his secret all in the same night.

“But that was before that boat went down,” John interrupted firmly, deliberately driving it home as the younger man grimaced again. “Before he spent the last five years in some kind of hell.”

It was clearly a point that needed to be repeated, however many times it took to get it through the other reformed playboy’s somewhat thick skull. The archer definitely hadn’t been on that island the whole time like he said, and he also wasn’t alone there. Because he might’ve been able to teach himself some survival skills, but not actual fighting technique and all the languages he apparently spoke—never mind however the hell he happened to join the Russian mob. But that didn’t matter here, what mattered was helping the other man across from him accept that wishing wouldn’t make his friend turn back into the same kid he’d lost when that boat had sunk. No one could go back to what they were…

And it was entirely possible that John Diggle was letting himself be influenced by Felicity and Oliver both a little too much. He didn’t have any actual training in psychology, save for the short courses the military made everyone take and the times he’d had to talk to counselors himself to prove he had a handle on his P.T.S.D while in or after leaving a war zone.

“I know,” Tommy sighed again. “But—”

“Give him some credit,” John cut in again. “He had to wise up at least a little bit.

“I know!” the other man threw his hands up. “But there were no women on that island!”

John blinked, because that hadn’t been what he was really expecting this to come back to. Sure, it was what the other man had started with, but the bodyguard had thought it was going to turn into another diatribe about the dangers and/or immorality of vigilantism, but apparently not.

Apparently Tommy Merlyn had moved on to wanting to accept that Oliver had changed in many ways, but maybe not in the growing up way in which the cut-off Merlyn heir was trying to?

It was especially unexpected from the same man that’d been all gung-ho about getting his best buddy back on the party scene a few months ago. But that may’ve been in part because Tommy hadn’t wanted his back-from-the-dead best friend to make up with the ex-girlfriend he’d happened to fall head-over-heels for while his friend was ‘dead.’ And okay, that, too, might be John being just a bit too cynical again…
“I mean, I love him, man. Really, I do,” Tommy went on then, looked like he was trying to solve the secrets of the universe while he forced the words together. “He’s like a brother to me. But he was back then, too. And you didn’t know him then.” He shook his head. “The number of times Laurel took him back after he’d done something stupid? I lost count… and I never could get my head around it anyway…” he trailed off, frowning in that far-away sort of way that meant he was lost in unhappy thoughts.

John waited a moment, and then spoke up again. “But you’re with Laurel now, Tommy,” he pointed out in the most nonjudgmental voice he could manage. “Oliver’s with Felicity.”

“I know…” Tommy said again, nodding tiredly. “But don’t you get it? Laurel, she took him back again and again and again. Do you really think Felicity’ll do that when he screws up?”

“Depends on how he screws up. Can’t say I can see him cheating on her, and anything else?” John shrugged again. “Felicity can handle him.”

He wasn’t so sure Oliver was always as capable of handling his genius girlfriend, but the blonde could definitely hold her own just fine.

The slightly distant, slightly static sounds of the vigilante entering another short but brutal fight —THUD! SLAM! SMASH! CRASH!—were a weird contrast to the silent war on Tommy Merlyn’s face as he struggled with what John Diggle was saying on top of his own fears and doubts. Still watching for Felicity’s security system to come back up with one eye as he watched the other man with the other, John realized unexpectedly what Tommy was missing here. That the fear he was feeling wasn’t really rooted in jealousy: no, it was based far more in his own self-doubts.

Oliver and Felicity were still somewhere in that sweet, lovey-dovey phase where nothing was wrong between them. They might argue about ‘vigilante stuff’ a little, but the two of them both seemed to be so good at compartmentalization that overall the issues hadn’t started to boil, or even steam, just yet.

Tommy and Laurel were past that. They’d been dating—with real dates—a lot longer. And now they were living together, too. So maybe their honeymoon phase was over and Tommy didn’t know how to swim in the boiling pot he also did not want to jump out of…

Either way, this wasn’t about Oliver and Felicity, which that made it seem even less fair that he was the one playing psychiatrist right now. But he was pretty sure confronting Merlyn with what
he’d just realized, not letting him hide behind his concerns for their mutual friend, wouldn’t help either. Not yet.

Because he just didn’t know Tommy Merlyn that well.

He knew Oliver pretty well at this point, and in some ways Felicity resembled an open book… some of the time, anyway.

John knew Felicity could handle herself. Maybe even in an actual fight, going by what he and the vigilante had been able to dig up a little about why Felicity might’ve taken up sword-fighting in the first place. That, and the simple fact that they were pretty sure she was holding back. Swords weren’t within John Diggle’s personal expertise at all, but the simple ease with which she’d moved with one told him she was better than she was letting on. A lot better, maybe, given the fact that she’d been able to at least mostly dodge her way around a mugger and get away. If only they could get her to admit that.

Or at least figure out why he was being turned into the couples counselor here…

Tommy sighed. “I don’t know…” he shook his head unhappily. “He’s been so much happier now that he’s moving forward with her—but he was talking about her being safer without him…”

“She might be, she might not be,” John shook his head. “He’s already had to face the fact that she’s sticking around whether he’s dating her or not. Breaking up with her would only make her less likely to listen to him about her personal safety. He knows that. He’s not an idiot.”

“No, but this is when he usually messes up!” Tommy groused as he started to run his hands through is hair, only to stop with a wince when he found the hand the Huntress had injured still didn’t feel like cooperating with him yet.

“Maybe he’ll mess up, maybe he won’t. They’re his mistakes to make. And,” John glanced back at him as he went on. “You’re assuming Felicity’s gonna let him get away with it, even though she won’t give him as many chances as Laurel did. Make up your mind. Me?” He shrugged as he looked back at the computer monitors. “Like I said, I’m sure she can handle him.”

“Yeah, but—”
“And if I’m wrong? Then he and I are gonna be spending a lot more time sparring for a while,” the ex-soldier finished, gesturing towards the sparring mats when the other man blinked, which managed to make him wince as the realization struck.

“O… kay,” Tommy replied more uncertainly.

So John backed down just a little, “Again, I can’t say I’ve heard of any major problems between them yet myself.”

Because he was not going to be the psychoanalytical one here who told Tommy to lay down on the medical table like it was a couch and he was Freud. Nope. Not happening.

Verdant’s manager shook his head. “Well, he’s thinking about running, he was just talking to me about it last night,” Tommy yold him. “That was always how it started.” He shook his head. “Sometimes it was just a few extra crazy nights of partying. Sometimes he seemed to wanta forget he even had a girlfriend.”

Another CRASH came through the comm. again, but still no report of trouble or expectation of it, so the bodyguard ignored it.

“So he’d break up with her?” John winced, going with it because he apparently had to.

“No. He’d just cheat on her…” Tommy shook his head. “You know, I don’t think Ollie ever actually broke up with Laurel himself…” he trailed off as he thought about that, but John pressed the point.

“So you think he’s gonna cheat on Felicity?” John hazarded, not even looking at the other man as he quickly responded in the negative—a hesitant, second-guessing negative, but a negative all the same.

His eyes had already gone back to check the cameras again, which were still only partially working. Around the club, the mansion, Q.C. and all the general areas they were now watching, too, everything looked fine. But the views they were supposed to have of Felicity’s home street were still dark. Dammit.

*That* was bothering him much more than this conversation that he didn’t really think needed to be
taking place. He couldn’t quite see the archer being that stupid: maybe back when he’d been young and extra-stupid, but the more world-weary young man who was trying to save their city surely wouldn’t go so far to destroy his own happiness. John couldn’t see even the remote possibility of that happening himself. Maybe that was why he couldn’t bring himself to say he’d beat the vigilante black-and-blue if he happened to be that stupid.

He would do it, sure, and more than likely get some nasty bruises himself for the effort if Oliver decided to fight back. But then the bodyguard couldn’t really see his employer avoiding the beating if he even happened to hurt Felicity accidentally, so there was that, too. Might just be easier to hand Felicity her sword…

But, again, this conversation really wasn’t about the archer he was listening for and the tech genius he was still trying to watch for right now.

“Arrow to Spartan,” the vigilante’s voice split the radio silence then, making his bodyguard realize he hadn’t heard much from him in the last minute, so the other man was undoubtedly headed back to his bike from wherever that last ‘fight’ had taken him.

John un-muted his side of the comm and responded immediately, “Spartan here.”

Tommy went silent with his circuitous concerns right away. Not a surprise, since he was obviously coming to the bodyguard for help behind the vigilante’s back. Clearly as a concerned friend, but also as one that wasn’t sure how to voice those same concerns to the friend he was worried about yet. Then again, if he and Oliver had sort of already talked about this, he probably had the right idea to not say anymore about it unless Oliver did seem about to do something stupid… then again, considering what he was doing right now and just about every other night, that might be a very hard thing for his childhood friend to judge.

“Still no signs of either quarry,” Oliver reported brusquely, pausing a second before asking more softly. “How’s Oracle doing?”

John grimaced, but made himself straighten his face out again before he answered a breath later than he otherwise would have. “Oracle wants you to stay focused on your patrol, remember?”

 Barely a full beat of silence, then the archer’s sigh was almost a growl. “Right,” he paused, then added, “I’m gonna do one more circuit, then call it a night if nothing comes up.”
“Roger that,” John acknowledged, then muted his end of the comm again. The vigilante probably wouldn’t hear all that much over the roar of his motorcycle’s engine, but he’d definitely hear Digg’s side of the conversation if not for the ‘mute’ button. And while he was already in the middle of all of this, John Diggle was not sure he wanted to clue the other man in on that anytime soon.

After a few moments of listening to the sound of a the motorcycle through the comm, with the vigilante apparently not coming up with anything else he wanted to communicate just yet, his bodyguard turned back to the other ongoing conversation. It’d only be a few more minutes now before he’d have to call Felicity again and/or tell Oliver about the problem with her security system, but he’d promised her fifteen minutes, so she still had another five.

So John glanced back at the other man that’d been waiting with somewhat surprising patience—he hadn’t even been fidgeting at all. “You gotten that looked at yet?” he indicated the partially wrapped hand in response to Tommy’s confused frown, which made the younger man blink again.

“Huh?” Another blink, then Tommy was shaking his head. “No. It’s fine. Really, it’s a lot better. Barely bothers me anymore, as long as I don’t do anything with it.”

“Uh-huh. I’m sure it feels that way. But ‘feels better’ and actually ‘better’ aren’t the same thing. You should still see your doctor, or a nurse practitioner to make sure it’s on the mend,” John told him firmly, pausing again to actually meet and hold his eyes with the same seriousness. He didn’t like looking away from the monitors with how long Felicity’s street had been dark so far—a lot could happen in ten to fifteen minutes, after all—but this needed to be said, too.

“But you—”

“I administered first-aid, Tommy. I was trained for that on the battlefield, but anyone I saw to always checked-in with real medical professionals after that. That’s S.O.P,” he shook his head and went on when the other man opened and closed his mouth a few times. “And you’re not like Oliver. You don’t have to worry about someone linking your injury to the vigilante being hurt recently. You can just say someone got too deep in their drinks here a few nights ago, but you’re not pressing charges, and that should be the end of it far as most people are concerned.”

Tommy was frowning down at his hand now, but he nodded slowly when the former soldier finished. “Okay. Yeah, I guess,” he sighed. “Laurel will be happier, at least.”

“So will you, if you can make sure it’s healing right and that you know how to make sure it stays that way.” John told him. Then, after a second’s consideration, he added, “Once you’ve healed up,
come down here when you’ve got the time. We can go over some basic self-defense."

“Uh, thanks,” Tommy winced, his eyes darting towards the mats and other training equipment nervously. “But I—”

“I’m not gonna beat you black-and-blue, Merlyn, and Oliver won’t either,” John interrupted firmly, holding his eyes when they came back to him again, making sure the message was getting through. “We’ll just go over the basics. Might keep you out of another tight spot in the future.”

Tommy hesitated a few longer beats, glancing between him and the training area again, before his shoulders slumped a little. “That’d be good, I guess,” he admitted with a sigh. “Okay, yeah. Thanks. I’ll-uh. I’ll talk to my doctor and check downstairs when I’m not wrapping it anymore, okay?”

“Fair enough,” John nodded, before looking back at the monitors again. Not able to hold back a frown as he saw the blank-black boxes were still there, and glanced at the time to confirm that the fifteen minute marker from his call to Felicity’s house was approaching just as fast as he thought it was.

“So, um, do you think—”

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” the bodyguard finally reassured the other man. “Already was, but like I said, I can’t say I’ve seen a problem yet.”

“I know, I just…” Tommy sighed, shaking his head. “I know he’s changed, but I don’t want to see him screw up again.”

John nodded, “That’s fair,” he replied, watching the digital clock in the corner of the monitor that still wasn’t displaying all the right digital feeds. She had under two minutes now.

Tommy only sighed again. “And I know I can’t really save him from himself, and it’s his mistake to make if he does, but I still want to try and help, you know?”

“Yeah,” John nodded, not able to keep his frown from returning when another minute went by. “That’s what friends are for,” he shook his head, not willing to move his eyes from that monitor now that he was not quite counting the seconds as he debated between telling Oliver before, after
or as he was leaving to head for Felicity’s place himself.

Because something could be very wrong, he had no way of knowing with the cameras down, but it also might be nothing. Maybe Felicity had already fixed the system on her end and was just having more trouble sending it back through to these screens because of the network, the distance, or something like that. Or maybe Oliver’s crazy ‘not-ex’ had somehow seduced the Dark Archer into helping her and they were making Felicity hack the F.B.I or the U.S Marshalls right now. With those little boxes being black voids instead of Felicity’s street and yard in miniature, he really couldn’t know.

He should have made Felicity stay on the phone with him, at least while she was working on fixing the system. It’s not like the vigilante would’ve been able to tell.

Tommy could’ve come to talk to him about whether or not Oliver had grown up another time. Or not.

While he was leaving was probably the best bet.

“Yeah,” Tommy agreed, pausing a moment before he asked. “Hey, is everything okay? Ollie’s not —”

“He’s fine,” John cut him off, pausing a second as he contemplated actually answering honestly. Sure, he didn’t want the younger man to get underfoot, even if it was to try and be helpful, but then he somehow doubted it’d be that difficult to make Tommy Merlyn stay put: nowhere near as difficult as Oliver, for sure.

But then the little black boxes were gone. And with only some seconds to spare, each window was suddenly full of the black-and-white feeds of Felicity’s street again.

“Never mind,” John couldn’t hide his relief as he answer. “Everything’s fine.”

“What was—”

“There was a problem on one of the security feeds—the system went down,” the bodyguard admitted. “But it’s fixed now. Felicity just fixed it.”
In the nick of time, and nowhere near as quickly as he had honestly expected her to, but she had managed it within the fifteen minutes she’d asked for. And her street looked like the sleepy, quiet place it was supposed to be right now.

Detective Cassidy still wasn’t home across the street yet, which was a little concerning. Both because his presence meant the street was that much safer and because him working late might mean more trouble from the Vigilante Taskforce soon. But other than that…

Ring—

John barely let his phone get through that first ring before he answered, holding to the ear that was free of a comm piece. “Took you longer than I expected. Everything okay?”

“I’m fine, Digg, really. Thanks,” Felicity answered, but instead of exasperated or annoyed she sounded a lot more tired than she did just fifteen minutes ago. “How’s everything else going?”

“We’re good,” John answered, then asked, “You sound tired. Gonna turn in for the night?”

There was a moment of almost audible hesitation before she asked, “Do you know how much longer he’s…”

“It’s been a quiet night,” John answered again when she trailed off. “He’s doing one more sweep right now, but he’ll probably be on his way over after that.” He paused a second, then asked, “Want me to tell him to quit early? Or head home instead?”

“Doubt you’d have much luck with the second, Digg. He’d probably just sleep outside,” Felicity snorted, knowing that was true as well as he did. “And I said I’m fine. Think I’ll take a shower and get ready for bed, but let me know if you guys need anything, okay?”

“Roger that,” John replied, then shook his head. “You’re not very good at taking the night off, are you?”

“Humph, no more than you are, I’m sure.”
“Guilty,” he shrugged as he added, “I’ll be keeping an eye on the cameras, but let me know if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay,” Felicity’s sigh sounded especially tired again, even exhausted, but she wasn’t arguing as she continued through a yawn. “Thanks. Have a good night, Digg.”

“Good night, Felicity,” John replied, before finally hanging up. Breathing a full sigh of relief now that he wasn’t blind anymore and he knew that she was safe.

“So, everything’s okay, right?” Tommy asked almost as soon as he’d hung up.

“Yeah, all clear,” John confirmed, but he was still frowning at the now fully functioning security screen. Not entirely sure why himself.

Everything looked fine: on Felicity’s street and everywhere else—except maybe for one of the club employees having a smoke a little too close to the ally the vigilante entered through, but he’d be back inside by the time the vigilante got back. That, or he’d be out of his job here if he took that many long cigarette breaks.

Maybe it really was just that he’d expected Felicity to fix the tech problem so much more quickly than she had. Sure, she was still faster than most people ever would be, but he’d gotten used to expecting near miracles from the computer genius, which was hardly fair. But she’d sounded so tired now, much more so on that second call then she had during the first call, fifteen minutes earlier. It was entirely possible she just wasn’t running at full speed when she needed to be sleeping. And who knows, maybe he’d just gotten used to frowning at that particular monitor.

“Well, uh, good,” Tommy said again then, and when the ex-soldier looked back at him he was finally turning back towards the stairs up to the club, which was still going strong up above them. “I’ll just head up then, I guess. Gotta manage and all.”

“Maybe act a little less like you’re trying to sneak out of here when you go back up, too,” John suggested mildly. “This is just the basement, remember? Nothing for anyone up there to be interested in.”

“Yeah. Yeah, right. I’ll keep that in mind,” Tommy agreed, sighing as he started up the stairs. He was halfway up when the bodyguard heard him mutter to himself, “Wonder if Dad canceled my
health insurance, too… I should probably know that…”

John grimaced, sympathetic despite himself to the younger man’s horrible relationship—or really non-relationship—with his father. It was harder to be sympathetic to Tommy Merlyn’s unexpected loss of his father’s massive fortune and all the privileges it’d provided. But from the comments he and Oliver had both dropped about Merlyn Senior, the younger Merlyn’s life had been far from ideal family-wise.

His mother was murdered by some low-life in the Glades; right outside the clinic she’d setup to help the people there. And after that his father all but abandoned him, before returning after years away to still be basically a non-entity in his son’s life.

Throw in the best friend he’d gotten back from the dead, and that back-from-the-dead friend being the city’s now infamous vigilante…

And well, John might not particularly like Tommy Merlyn most of the time, but he was human so he was sympathetic to some degree. He didn’t like that yet another individual had found out Oliver’s secret—a real risk to all of them. But he was reasonably sure Tommy wouldn’t follow in the footsteps of the woman that’d almost broken his hand. Also, having Verdant’s manager aware of what Oliver did—what they all did—down here, could be helpful eventually.

And despite the fact that John Diggle did not want to be looked to as any type of relationship counselor—Lyla would be right to say: God help the idiot who thought that was a good idea. He still was the one that was here. Just like he’d be the one to teach Tommy how to get out of or completely avoid the clutches of crooks like the Huntress.

Because it was the right thing to do.

And maybe the idiot was growing on him a little bit. Like a leech.

Still, as his primary partner-in-crime completed that one last sweep of the city—searching less for criminals to stop and more for people who needed help—John knew he was in a good place. Right where he wanted to be: making a difference.

It was a good feeling to find again.
Real good.

No matter how much crazy—and who knows what else—came along with it…

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! A little bit more from Digg’s POV. That was fun, wasn’t it? Some of you may—or may not—have noticed that I’ve already started gradually revising this story. Most of the edits thus far have just been grammatical or structural, though I’m taking longer on the next revision (Chapter 9) because I’m probably going to stick another flashback in there. Honestly it’s driving me a little bit crazy, because I swear I already wrote that stupid flashback, but now I can’t find it, which means either I dreamt writing it or it’s in one of my far too many little notebooks… but that’s why the revision slowed down. Anyway, if you’re interested in re-reading, the chapters that have already been revised are 1-8, and you’ll know when the other ones are altered at all because they’ll suddenly have names, too. Or I’ll mention it the next time I update like I am now.

As for finishing Bloody Secrets, however I think—at this point I can promise there will be no more long delays between scenes for this story. Because it’s mostly already done anyway, but I’ve also managed to figure out the map I’ve worked for myself between this story, the interludes (plural) and the next story. Hence why this story finally has its total number of chapters is now marked for this story. The current plan is 2 interludes/stand-alone stories after Bloody Secrets, followed by the next segment of the series: based of course on S1E18 “Salvation,” and tentatively titled “A Hero?” at the moment. And—And!—there shouldn’t be any long waits for those chapters, either, because that story has been more than half-written for months now. So, yay!

I’d love to hear what everyone’s thinking: about this scene, this story, whatever. And, also, about the show. Though, I have to confess again: I haven’t been watching much of this season, save for the early episodes and some scenes on YouTube that sounded fun. I haven’t been able to pull myself back to it yet. Maybe once it finishes (hopefully with Oliver & Felicity back together) I’ll be able to psych myself up into watching what came before, but at the moment I’m feeling kind of ‘blah’ about it. But, either way, I’m updating again! So that’s good, right?

Thanks for reading! More to come soon!

~ Jess
Chapter Notes

Almost done with this one, just one more scene to go after this. Then some interludes. Then the next story! ...Wow, this one took a while, didn't it? *sigh* Enjoy the new scene! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver’s P.O.V.

Oliver had been in bed with more women then he’d ever be able to count. Notches on his bedpost would’ve upset Raise if he’d made them at home, and all too many nights had blurred beyond distinction anyway over the years. Especially since so many of those ‘romantic encounters’ had occurred under the fog of at least a heck of a lot of alcohol. But even if he could remember more about those nights, it wouldn’t matter now. Because last night was different.

Being in Felicity’s bed was different. Even though they hadn’t had sex. Or maybe especially because they hadn’t had sex? It didn’t make sense… and yet somehow it did, too.

Because it was Felicity.

When Oliver had gotten back here from his patrol last night, he’d found Felicity freshly showered and clearly ready for bed: she’d looked more than half-asleep on her feet. The sight of her heavy eyelids, not hidden by make-up or the glasses that were already stored away in their case for the night, had been a real surprise. Taking the night off should not have tired her out more than working half the night in the basement beneath Verdant after a work whole day at Q.C did. But apparently it really had.

Oliver hadn’t had the heart to fight her when she’d shoved him into her bathroom and told him to take a shower. He’d barely taken the time to wash the greasepaint off his face when he was changing back at the Foundry.

He had wondered what the hell had happened to her couch, but it was clearly something he’d have to ask when she finally woke up this morning. Her mumbled, tired responses to each of the two times he’d tried to ask her last night hadn’t made any sense to him.
“I’m getting a new couch. The room didn’t look right anymore…” Had been her first reply to his query about the couch, later followed by, “It was a mess. It had to go…”

Oliver couldn’t wrap his mind around either one.

The couch—and the room, the whole house for that matter—had always looked perfectly fine. Elegant but comfortable, in so many ways Felicity’s home perfectly embodied her. Neat and tidy, but full of tiny treasures all around, each one a welcome and welcoming window into the world that’d made the bright and vibrant woman who she was.

And the closest he’d ever seen to a mess in this place was when Felicity left a dish or two in the sink to be washed later if she was in a hurry. Well, and when he broke down the backdoor, but that hadn’t come anything to do with their couch.

And if she wanted a new couch, why didn’t she pick one out before getting rid of the old one? Wasn’t that how it was normally done? Rather than leaving a big empty space where there was supposed to be a big, comfy piece of furniture to sit on and watch movies from in the living room?

If Oliver had known she was replacing it, he would’ve asked her to let him move it down into the basement beneath the club. He’d liked that couch. But that was neither here nor there now, since it was already gone.

She’d probably given it to one of her neighbors or something like that. Maybe someone who really needed it fast: because they needed a bed or something like that, and that was why her couch had just suddenly up and disappeared? He supposed he could check on the security footage next time he got back to the basement, though he’d also have to ask why Digg didn’t think it was worth mentioning that she was having her neighbors come over to steal her furniture when she was supposed to be staying inside, safe and secure behind locked doors that were under surveillance for a reason.

It seemed very strange that she’d risk any of her neighbors possibly getting caught in the crossfire if the Huntress had happened to drop in, never mind that Felicity herself was supposed to be safe behind locked doors with cameras watching them the whole time he was gone. Maybe she didn’t think Helena would be willing to hurt innocent people who had nothing to with her father. Oliver hated that he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was wrong, but he hated the thought of her afraid, too.

Felicity sighed softly in her sleep, drawing his eyes over to her pretty face: light and peaceful in sleep now that she wasn’t being dragged down by the exhaustion and worry he hadn’t been able to
miss when he got here. In the early morning sunlight she glowed: content and peaceful in the deep sleep she’d so desperately needed.

It was relief to see that heavy exhaustion gone. That exhaustion had made Oliver wish he’d told her to just go to bed and he’d let himself in when he got back. He wouldn’t have needed to break in through the back door again, because he did have a key now. So he could’ve let himself in while she slept. Then he would have wondered where the hell her couch had gone, but at least she would’ve gotten more sleep. And he’d slept in plenty of places a lot worse than her living room floor.

Except Felicity probably wouldn’t have gone to bed if he’d told her to anyway. Judging by that worry that’d had just as much of a hold on her pretty face as the exhaustion, she probably would’ve waited up for him anyway. No matter how much she needed the sleep.

At least she was asleep in his arms now. And, even better, the silky camisole and short sleep shorts she was wearing left only a little to the imagination—and also left both her arms and shoulders right out in the open for him to study as much as he liked. He would’ve expected her slight form would need to be bundled up more for the cold winter night, but then he couldn’t ever remember her complaining about being cold either. And Oliver definitely appreciated the opportunity to study her slender form to his heart’s hard-found contentment. Even with the early morning sunlight seeping in through her bedroom curtains, he couldn’t find the thin scar her early injury—from her near-mugging right outside his club—had to have become.

When Felicity had been leading him through her couch-less living room last night, Oliver had been reassured by the sight of so much skin, too. Because he couldn’t see any bruises or marks of any other kind on marring any of her smooth, soft skin then, and he didn’t see any signs of it now either.

So Helena hadn’t hurt her. Oliver probably shouldn’t be surprised by just how much of a relief that was, but it was and he was, too.

Another soft sigh brushing across his chest made a small smile take over Oliver’s own mouth. It’d been another nice surprise that she hadn’t hesitated to tuck herself against him when they laid down in bed: sure, she always ended up in his arms when they were watching movies together and fell asleep, but he hadn’t expected her to be just as cuddly lying down for the night in bed for the first time. Especially since they hadn’t had sex.

Though it may’ve had something to do with just how tired she was, too. She’d barely lasted a few minutes before she was completely passed out in his arms. And she’d been so far from coherent in those few minutes that he’d eventually feigned sleep himself, just so she’d stopped trying so hard to stay awake and talk about his relatively uneventful and fruitless patrol.
Not that Oliver had minded falling asleep like this, anymore than he minded waking up here now. Not at all. He liked waking up with Felicity in his arms. He liked it a lot.

Somehow the same peace he was feeling right now, watching her sleep, seemed to settle him in a way he honestly couldn’t remember feeling. Or, if he ever had, it had been for a very, very long time ago.

It felt safe.

Because he knew she was safe?

The vigilante really couldn’t say, even in his own head. But the peaceful, secure feeling was definitely there—settling his shoulders, his spine, somehow settling everything. Helping him relax in a way that being home at Queen Mansion just didn’t anymore.

The increasing twitter of early morning birdsong, though, finally made him sigh.

*Da-vey-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…*

Oliver shifted carefully, moving the arm he had wrapped around the blonde, cradling her against his chest, the most carefully of all he slowly ran a hand gently down along her shoulder. Searching now by touch for the injury that just the memory of made his blood heat up with anger. But, as far as he could tell, it wasn’t there anymore. Somehow, beneath his heavily callused fingertips, there was only the same smooth, soft skin his eyes were seeing.

*Da-vey-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…*

So, after another moment of searching, just to be sure, he carefully shifted her again till he could gently lay her head down on her pillow and then slowly moved his arm out from under her. This was a maneuver that he could do half-asleep and hung-over after years and years of partying followed by countless one-night-stands. These days Oliver wasn’t at all proud of it, but he was a bit glad he could pull it off now anyway.

*Da-vey-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…*
Felicity clearly needed as much sleep as she could get, but she’d be out the door and headed for work by quarter-of-eight at the latest all the same. The least he could do was make sure she slept as late as possible and had something to eat before she left. That was why he made sure her alarm wasn’t going to go off this morning before he padded for the door, pausing to look back at Felicity as she shifted again in the bed, snagging his pillow and seeming to wrap herself around it before she settled again. Still asleep.

_Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…_

Oliver had to smile at the sight, even as he carefully closed the bedroom door behind him and headed into the kitchen. He didn’t dare touch the coffee maker that was already preset to go off at its regular time. One, because he wasn’t sure the smell of the coffee hitting the bedroom before her alarm went off wasn’t something she’d very specifically timed. And two, because there was no way he was touching that machine before it brewed: he was completely unwilling to risk that his messing with any step of the process, save pouring the finished product when it was done, might ruin what was still the best cup of coffee he’d ever tasted anywhere.

Breakfast, however, he could manage. Raisa had made sure of that before he headed off for the first college he dropped out of—teaching him how to cook had always been her favorite method of keeping him busy when he was little. Thea had preferred baking, and Oliver hadn’t minded the results of that either, but basic breakfast staples were something he’d been to handle even back in junior high. That hadn’t helped him with Yao Fei’s first lesson back on the island. Raisa, of course, had never made him actually _kill_ his food. She had, however, made sure he knew how to cook the basics.

_Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…_

Oliver bent down to pull out the drawer under the oven, studying the two pans on top for a second before he picked the one on the right. As he closed the drawer, however, the sigh of a small, smooth stone on the tiled floor made him pause. He frowned and picked it up with his free hand, studying it even as he stood and set the pan on the stove.

It was a river stone: smooth and small, is slipped easily between his fingers and palm. After a moment’s thought, he glanced over at the bowl on the side table that boasted a whole bunch of them. After turning on the stove to start heating the pan up, he rounded the counter and crossed the couch-less living room again to set the stone on top of the others. Then frowned as he realized it didn’t look right, studying it for a few seconds till he figured out why. It wasn’t just the way the stones were stacked—the haphazard, random pile hadn’t just shifted for some reason, it look like they must’ve all been dumped out and then piled back in—but the bowl was different, too.
Oliver cocked his head to the side as he considered it for a moment, not sure which aspect of the early morning puzzle was stranger. That Felicity had decided to redecorate last night by rearranging the little stones in a new bowl. Or that that’d somehow led one of them ending up all the way across the room on the kitchen floor…

But the random bowl of rocks mattered a lot less to him than the disappearance of the couch did, so after that second of study he shook his head and went back into the kitchen. Opening the fridge he pulled out the eggs, butter, and—with some surprise—bacon. Then again, the only dietary restriction he ever remembered Felicity mentioning was nuts—apparently her mother was severely allergic to them, so she wasn’t comfortable eating them in any shape or form.

Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…
Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…
WHIR -er-er-er-er…

By the time the coffee grinder finally came on, and the brew’s almost magical aroma began to seep through the air like the delicious warmth of a favorite blanket, the bacon was already done. The eggs were most of the way there, and the toast would be popping up soon, too. So it wasn’t a setback at all when the bedroom door opened and his girlfriend stepped out.

“Good morning,” Felicity greeted him around a yawn, rubbing tiredly at her eyes for a moment before her hands dropped to the counter as she climbed up onto one of the barstools where he’d already placed a setting.

Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…

“Good morning,” Oliver returned with a smile that came as easily as relaxing his shoulders and everything else did here. “Sleep well?” he asked her as he handed her a mug of coffee, taking a sip of his own even as she, not surprisingly, did the same before answering him.

Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…

“Yeah,” she confirmed after that first vital sip. “You?”
Oliver nodded, and then a sound from the toaster told him the toast was ready, and a glance at the stove said the eggs were, too. So he quickly finished dishing their plates up, setting them both on the counter before he rounded it himself as he watched Felicity all but smother her toast in butter.
“Still no sign of Helena on the streets last night,” he mentioned as he sat down. “Your search programs haven’t found anything either, right?”

The blonde sighed wearily. “I really don’t think she’s in Starling anymore, Oliver. Her dad’s already in witness protection—and the Marshalls wouldn’t put him anywhere around here, so why would she stick around?”

Oliver swallowed the bite of bacon he’d been munching on before replying, “She’s determined to kill her father, she’s not gonna give up.” He shook his head. “And if she can’t find him herself, she might come back.”

“Because she might think I can,” Felicity nodded, starting to sound more awake even after only a few sips of coffee. “But I didn’t help her last time she was here, Oliver. I sent her on a wild goose chase, and she didn’t have a clue. Why would she think trying again would work when she has to know you’re not going to be happy to see her?”

The vigilante shrugged, “I don’t know, but I can’t say I understand her half the time, anyway.”

Sometimes he did. He really, really did.

Helena’s father had murdered her fiancé, and that loss on top of that betrayal couldn’t be easy for anyone. That the reason Bertinelli had Michael killed was because of the laptop of evidence Helena, herself, was planning to turn over to the F.B.I, must’ve only made it all the harder. All of that, Oliver was still sympathetic to, despite everything else.

But everything else was the problem. Helena didn’t think. She let her emotions dictate her actions entirely almost all the time, and didn’t care about all the innocent people who could—and did—get caught in the crossfire along the way. After the fact she might feel a little bad: she had apologized for his mother getting hurt when she killed one of her father’s men, after all, but that was only when she’d ended up facing him because he’d sought her family out, not the other way around. And even needing to apologize to him face-to-face hadn’t been enough to stop her from doing the same thing again. To her, the ends completely justified the means, even if those means might’ve been a mob war that would’ve devastated the whole city. Even if that meant threatening the people Oliver cared about, and trying to terrorize Felicity into getting what she wanted. Even if none of that had worked, for her the means were still justified by the end-goal she hadn’t yet accomplished…
“Anger has a way of messing with your head,” Felicity offered quietly, reaching for the small glass of orange juice he’d also put in front of her place setting, taking a sip before going on. “And vengeance is all anger.” She shook her head. “Letting that be what your life’s all about—that just consumes your life. Doesn’t leave room for anything else. And, when it’s all you have, it has to be all the harder to let go…”

Oliver couldn’t argue with that, so he just took another bite of his scrambled eggs.

“Did she seem… I don’t know, a little better than last time? When you saw her, I mean?” Felicity asked, and she shrugged when he blinked at her. “I know she hurt Tommy, and she threatened your family, but did she seem better or worse to you?”

Oliver shook his head slowly, but he did try to think his answer through. Because he honestly hadn’t thought about the Huntress’s latest assault on Starling City in those kind of terms yet. Didn’t know if he ever would have if Felicity hadn’t asked, but she had, so he thought about it.

In Helena’s first rampage through Starling, his mother had ended up in the hospital. This time, she’d threatened his whole family and hurt Tommy’s hand to get what she wanted. When that hadn’t worked, she’d gone after Felicity, too.

Other than her father’s mobbed-up lawyer, though the Huntress hadn’t killed anybody this time. Not in Starling, anyway. Though even the trail of bodies she’d left elsewhere had all been mobsters. So in that way at least, she’d gotten a bit better.

In that way, maybe his teaching her how to aim a crossbow hadn’t completely back-fired. Like Talia had taught him, aiming an arrow took a lot more control than a bunch of bullets. It required discipline in a way that just pointing a gun and pulling the trigger simply didn’t: a barrage of bullets could do a lot of damage even if your aimed suck, but an arrow would only find one target so you had to aim. And, to some extent, Helena’s crossbow seemed to do the same thing for her.

But his lessons had also led to Helena turning them back on him. That colder calculation had helped her find his weaknesses to leverage against him. But it was still better than the hot rage that’d made her think an all-out, open gang-war between the Triad and the Italian mob would ever be a good thing for anyone.

And the Huntress hadn’t just threatened him. Hadn’t just threatened to hurt his family if he didn’t help her—undoubtedly knowing if she’d actually done that all the sympathy he did feel for her would’ve vanished forever. And one of the arrows in his quiver would’ve belonged to her then.
She’d hurt Tommy, but that was still to get to Oliver himself. The end’s justified the means, and Oliver was the target, not Tommy, so he could still blame himself for that more than Helena herself.

Worse, Helena had gone after Felicity. And not to again secure Oliver’s help, but to threaten the brilliant, beautiful genius herself. That was something the vigilante couldn’t forgive either, and maybe that was why he hadn’t seen a single sign of her since then.

“About the same,” Oliver finally decided on saying. “Hell-bent on killing her father at all costs.” He shook his head. “But a bit worse. She knew her window was closing—that made her desperate.”

His awareness of that furious desperation was what’d made him threaten Helena. What’d made him remind her that he wouldn’t allow innocent lives to be lost in the crossfire. Had made him say that if anyone other than her father died, he’d put an arrow in her. Because he’d been absolutely sure she wasn’t above putting crossbows in the cops and U.S Marshalls who were just doing their job transporting her father to secure his testimony against the people like him who were worse because they were still roaming free.

“Hmm,” Felicity nodded, then finished off her piece of toast in three quick, neat bites.

Oliver waited to see if she’d say something else, but after they’d both taken and swallowed several more bites of breakfast together he realized she was waiting for him, too. So he made himself go on. “But, we still don’t know where she is now. Or why the other archer was helping her. If he was helping her,” he finished with a sigh, picking up his coffee as he started mulling that over again.

No matter how he tried to work it all out in his head, it just didn’t make sense.

Not really.

Yeah, the attack on the police station was similar to the Christmas Hostage Crisis in some ways. The attacker had worn what looked like the same armor, all the way down to the dark bow—but he hadn’t fired any of his arrows at all so none were left behind. Leaving no sure way of comparing even his weaponry to the ones still in the S.C.P.D evidence lock-up or the one they still had stored in the basement beneath Verdant. The Dark Archer had been a brutally efficient fighter, of a similar class to pre-Mirakuru Slade. Thankfully nowhere near as strong as the ex-A.S.I.S operative had become after the Mirakuru had made him mad, but that same edge of disciplined brutality had
reminded the vigilante a lot of his first teacher. Still, it’d been too long since Oliver had last fought someone so skilled—it’d taken him completely by surprise and therefore nearly cost him his life.

But, despite the similarities, Oliver couldn’t be sure that the Dark Archer and the man that’d taken Helena from the S.C.P.D were one and the same. The man they’d seen on the hacked surveillance footage, what little they had been able to see of him, had definitely looked and moved like a real fighter. But as over-the-top as that whole thing had been, he hadn’t killed anyone.

Then again, other than crossing off some of the others that vigilante had already crossed off on The List, the only one the Dark Archer had seemed interested in killing then was the Hood. That was why Oliver had automatically assumed the Dark Archer’s rescue of the Huntress had had something to do with finding him again.

Instead, the other archer had apparently let Helena go—let her roam free, to do whatever she’d wanted, and she’d chosen to go after Felicity to find her father. But then she’d completely vanished, and there’d been no sign of her presumably ill-intentioned rescuer around the city again either. Not in days.

It didn’t make sense.

Da-vee-ur, vee-ur, veer, veer…

Not much about the other archer did, of course, but all the unknowns surrounding all of this had really left Oliver reeling. That was why he was still scouring the streets for the Huntress, even though he more than half expected she’d either fled the city entirely or was the other archer’s prisoner now.

If it was the first Oliver didn’t doubt she’d be back again, but the second would be far worse. Because while Helena could be a threat on her own, some small shred of conscious kept her from actually attacking the people he loved. Other than Tommy, but she undoubtedly believed he’d forced her hand there—that was probably why she’d hurt Tommy’s hand specifically. That, and if she’d been using a weapon instead of a handhold on Tommy, Oliver undoubtedly would’ve drawn his weapon, too. Helena was clever enough to know that.

But if it was the second… if it was the second, the Huntress knew far, far too much. Because while something might hold her back from really ‘doing something they’d both regret,’ like she said, the other archer wouldn’t have that problem. And all he’d have to get out of Helena was who the Hood really was and then…
“Hey,” Felicity startled him out of the dark downward spiral of his thoughts as she took his hand and squeezed it gently, her big blue eyes holding his as gently and firmly as her hold on his hand was. Not so firmly that he couldn’t easily pull away, of course if he wanted to. But he really, really didn’t. “Stop worrying so much, you know it won’t help.”

“I can’t not worry,” Oliver sighed. “If the other archer has Helena, then it’s only a matter of time before he finds out—”

“Maybe he doesn’t,” Felicity interrupted, squeezing his hand again. “Maybe he wasn’t the one that broke her out. You and the other guy don’t own the only bows and arrows out there. There are other archers around the world.”

“I know that, but—”

“But nothing. Maybe the mob got tired of all the messes she’s been making, here and all around the world for them.” Felicity pointed out, shaking her head when he only stared at her then. “Maybe they hired another archer to take care of it.”

“No,” Oliver shook his head again. “If that were the case, she’d already be dead. They wouldn’t have broken her out: they would’ve just killed her.”

The Italian mob and the Bratva might be different in some ways besides their background nationalities, but in some ways organized crime was all the same everywhere. How they dealt with problems, and especially traitors, was one of those standard similarities. After all, a buried body tells no tales and troubles no one.

“So maybe she managed to annoy someone else entirely.” Felicity shrugged. “She’s not exactly cautious, or subtle.”

That, Oliver knew, was entirely true on both counts, which was why he nodded and then set to finishing off his plate in a few quick bites. Prior mornings together had taught him that if he didn’t make sure he finished before Felicity, she would insist in doing the clean up if he’d done the cooking.

“Oliver, we knew she was coming this time. If she comes back, we’ll know that, too. Long before she can get anywhere near any of us.” Felicity tried to reassure him again.
“I know,” Oliver told her as he put the butter and jam away, before he finished cleaning up his plate and everything else.

“But?” Felicity pressed as she handed him her plate, then snagged both their empty coffee cups from the counter to refill them.

“The other archer, back before Christmas he came out of nowhere. When I found out someone else was dropping bodies—using arrows to kill people I’d already crossed off on The List—I knew I had to stop him.” Oliver told her with another shake of his head as he put his plate in the dishwasher, too, before closing it up. “He was copying me. He was my responsibility.”

“He made his own choices, just like you did,” Felicity countered calmly, then she shook her head. “But you couldn’t ignore it.”

“No…”

“Wanting to keep your home safe, and wanting to protect and help people—those are all good things, Oliver. Not something you need to apologize for.”

“Maybe,” the vigilante allowed, still not ready to accept the mold she seemed determined to fit him in, so he hurried on before she could keep trying to reassure him. “But I couldn’t do it.”

“You tried,” Felicity insisted immediately. “And you did save the hostages.”

“He let me save them,” Oliver contradicted her just as quickly. “He let them go.”

“Because you came for them—you can’t assume he was bluffing, Oliver. He said he’d kill them if you didn’t come, so you went. You saved them.”

What she was saying made sense logically, but it still didn’t feel right. Maybe it never would. He was no hero.
“But that’s not the problem either, is it?” Felicity realized.

Again, Oliver nodded. “I wasn’t expecting someone like him. Someone who could really fight. Someone who knew about The List,” he frowned even more deeply. “He took me completely by surprise… And if that was him the other night, he did it again.”

“Except he didn’t,” Felicity insisted as she handed him his new coffee. “And you don’t even know if—”

“If that really was him, yeah, I know.”

“Do you?” Felicity pressed; both hands around her coffee cup as she watched him follow her back to the counter stools and sit down next to her again.

Oliver found himself frowning at her now, not sure where all this wanting to forget about the Huntress and the Dark Archer, too, was coming from. It wasn’t like not worrying about them wouldn’t mean that they—one or both of them—weren’t still out there, somewhere, and that they wouldn’t one day be back. Except he didn’t want her worrying and afraid, either. So he sighed, “You’re right.”

“Well, of course I am.”

It was her matter-of-fact tone and the little quirk of a smile starting along the edges of her mouth that made him laugh just then, smiling himself as that almost-smile became a full one. She’s surprised it out of him so suddenly that he almost had whiplash when her smile melted into pure concern as she reached a hand up to gently cup his face.

“Worrying about all of it won’t help.” Felicity continued more seriously again. “It’s worrying just to worry. That’s worse than worrying about the unknown, because no knowledge can fix it.”

Oliver objected to that. “They’re real people, Felicity. Real threats,” he shook his head. “Even if Helena somehow escaped the other archer without telling him anything, she’s had plenty of practice at holding a grudge.”

“Against her father.”
“And me,” the vigilante maintained. “Why do you think she was so determined to get my help with this?”

“Because she knew you were her only shot of getting to her father while he’s being protected by the U.S Marshalls here.”

“No.” Oliver shook his head again. “It wasn’t just that. I stopped her from killing her father last time. She saw that as a betrayal. I know she did.”

“Maybe,” Felicity allowed, and when she took a sip from her second cup of coffee then, it reminded him of his own.

Oliver raised his mug to his mouth again, and the coffee tasted just as amazing as the first cup on his tongue had: like her coffee always did. But he couldn’t let that distract him from the problem they were talking about. “And the other archer—the Dark Archer, if he has her—”

“If he was the one that saved her,” Felicity interrupted. “Why do you think he’d let her go to make me find her father for her?”

Making Oliver blink at her, “Might’ve been a trade,” he answered after a second’s thought, “Her father’s murder; for my identity.”

The blonde nodded calmly, and he couldn’t decide if the crisp ease of her calm should worry or relieve him. That thought almost distracted him from what she was saying. “If that was the deal, we don’t have to start worrying till we hear about Frank Bertinelli being dead.”

“We don’t know that,” the vigilante objected, a harsh sigh escaping even as he raised his coffee for another sip. Even that mouth-melting flavor couldn’t distract him from the far too bitter tastes it was competing with—failure and betrayal. “If he convinces Helena that he’ll help her in exchange for her help, she won’t hesitate.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Felicity allowed, shrugging again. “But that still dependends on a lot of assumptions. If that archer was the one who broke her out. If she’s still alive and wants to betray you. And if that archer is still after you—there hasn’t been any other sign of him since the Christmas hostages.”
Oliver should probably be bothered by the fact that the strongest of those factors in his mind were the first and last one, but it was true. After another sip of coffee, he shook his head again. “So what do you want me do? Just not worry about it?”

“Oh, of course not,” the blonde snorted, standing as she finished off her second cup and headed around the counter and towards the sink with it. “I try not to ask the impossible,” She smirked a little as he held his cup away from her, not about to give up even a sip or two of this coffee. “Think you could try to focus on something you can actually do something about? Where the city’s gradually improving crime rate hasn’t improved? Your family? Maybe spend some more time with Tommy?”

Oliver’s eyes dropped closed as he sighed again. “You’re right,” he told her with a nod, opening his eyes to meet hers again as she stood with her arms crossed, leaning back against the counter by the sink, clearly waiting for his cup. “I’ll try,” he promised, mindful of how she hadn’t mentioned anything about them.

Though maybe she didn’t need to: her voice was usually in his ear when he was wearing the hood now. And they had slept together last night. Without sex, which was a first for him in a really long, long time when it came to pretty women…

That earned him another small smile again. “Thank you.”

Oliver only nodded, because he hadn’t done anything to earn that smile or her thanks yet. And he wasn’t sure where all of this—and everything else—fit in his headspace either. But he also knew that she was right: worrying about it wouldn’t help. So he instead looked across the counter at the now empty space in front of her big T.V. “So, uh, what happened to the couch? You were kind of unclear about that last night?” he turned back to her with one eyebrow raised and tried not to frown when she turned to the sink and started washing her coffee cup.

“Yeah, I um, I decided I could use something new,” Felicity answered lightly. “Maybe longer? Or brighter? Brighter seems to be in now, isn’t it?”

Oliver honestly had no idea whatsoever, but that wasn’t why he was fighting a frown now. He didn’t care about what was ‘in’ when it came to home decor these days. But something about her light tone—and that she wasn’t looking at him—worried him. And it wasn’t just that he’d liked the missing couch. “…Sure, I guess, if that’s what you want?”
“Well, that’s a cop out if I ever heard one,” Felicity snorted, but she turned back to him with a smile that looked as sincere as she’d just sounded.

And somehow that made the taut line between his shoulder blades relax a little bit. At least enough he could then shrug, “Can’t say I’ve ever put much thought into interior decorating.”

“Prior thought’s not really required,” Felicity rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. “Either you like something, or you don’t.”

“…Okay?” his uncertain answer apparently deserved another eye-roll as she breezed by him and around the counter again, this time going out into the main room.

“Okay, how about yellow?” Felicity asked as she stopped where the couch had been towards him. “Like a daffodil.”

Oliver told himself he wasn’t hiding behind the kitchen counter even as he failed to suppress a grimace at the thought. Fortunately that wordless response seemed to be the right one, because she nodded before he could try any verbal response.

“Well, at least you’re not color-blind.”

“I really don’t—”

“Should it be bigger?”

Since she apparently wasn’t going to let up until he actually answered, Oliver finally shook his head. “I thought the other one was good,” he hazarded, hoping that that’d be enough. And silently giving up on the thought of any answers about the old couch after this.

“The loveseat was pretty cozy,” Felicity allowed, smiling softly.

Oliver blinked at her again. “Love seat?”
“That’s what they’re called,” she laughed, and then shook her head. “You weren’t kidding about not knowing anything about this.”

At that the billionaire could only shrug. “Guilty,” he agreed easily. Then, after studying her easy smile for a moment, he decided to try, “You know, you could just have it brought back. I’m sure your neighbors wouldn’t—”

“No,” Felicity sighed even as she cut him off, shaking her head all over again. “No, it was time for a change… We can’t let ourselves get stuck in the past. It’s what’s left behind while the present moves into the future, and we have to go, we can’t stay.”

“…Uh, okay?” Oliver slowly agreed, frowning as he watched her force that nostalgic—and almost weary—look from her face.

“Sorry,” Felicity shook her head yet again. “Long night last night, even without, you know. Thanks for the night off, but… we all have strange dreams sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Oliver agreed, still frowning as he now followed her back into the bedroom. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she nodded quickly again. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” the vigilante asked, going to his side of the bed to help when she started straightening the sheets, tossing the pillows towards the headboard.

“Maybe I’m still a little tired,” Felicity allowed as they finished tucking the sheet and started on the blankets and comforter. “But listen to me,” she rolled her eyes self-deprecatingly. “You must be exhausted.”

“Not really,” Oliver shrugged, standing straight once the bed was made. “I’m used to a lot less sleep, and I haven’t been working two or three fulltime jobs for a few months now.”

“Neither have I,” Felicity tried to tell him.
“Uh-huh.” He’d never tried to fit so much sarcasm into sounds that usually meant agreement, but it came across loud, clear and just as loaded with worried disapproval.

His girlfriend rolled her eyes, “Well you’ve got your mom keeping an eye on me now, so you don’t have to worry about me at Q.C.” She turned towards the door to her walk-in closet then. “Now I still need to do my daily run since someone didn’t want me running by myself last night.”

“I’ll throw some sneakers on then,” Oliver readily agreed, easily ignoring he jab. He was well aware of the fact she thought he was being ridiculously over-protective, but other than a lot of teasing and a few actual complaints she’d never argued with him that much about it. Maybe because she knew that his ‘paranoia’ was based in facts not just fear.

The last five years had been harder than he wanted to admit to anybody, even himself some of time. It might not be paranoia if they’re actually out to get you, but in the last half decade so many people had been gunning for him that that instinct that’d been so essential to his survival more than once wasn’t easy to turn off.

“You do that,” her voice came through the door, and he was pretty sure she was smiling. “I’m sure you’re just dying to start working out already.”

“It’s not an addiction.” Oliver snorted, but he couldn’t hold back another smile even as he asked her, “Are you sure you don’t want to take the day? If you’re tired—”

“I’m fine. Really,” she called from inside the closet, though the door opened barely a breath later and she came out in one of her jogging outfits, a pair of sneakers and socks in hand that she went to sit down on the bed to put on. “I’m no more used to being idle than you are, I just spend more time on my computer than working out.” She shot a frown at him then. “I can’t stay trapped in this house forever, I’d go crazy.”

“Fair enough,” Oliver agreed, raising his hands in surrender because that was really all he could do. “I’ll see you outside then,” he said as he hurried from the room, because otherwise she’d be waiting for him.

“I’ll be right out!” she called after him, probably planning on heading for the bathroom to brush her teeth first or something like that. Something he should do, too, but he didn’t have a toothbrush here, so he’d take care of it later.
Oliver wanted to turn the worry off. He wanted to stop seeing the shadows in the bright morning sunlight. He wanted to stop wondering what secrets might be just out of reach and whether he needed—or wanted—the answers, or not.

He wanted to, if it meant more moments like he’d had this morning. Waking up with Felicity sleeping safe and content in his arms. Eating breakfast and drinking her amazing coffee. Maybe not the weird conversation about the couch…

He wanted to be able to hang the hood up and leave it behind every night, as much as he could. Wanted to believe that he and his home were safe enough for that… But even if it really was, he just didn’t know if he even could.

Not yet. Maybe not ever…

But maybe he could try.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we’re almost to the end of Bloody Secrets now! One more scene to go, then onto the Interludes, followed by the next story in the series!
As always, comments, thoughts, ideas, etc. are very much appreciated! Let me know what you think about this scene. About the series in general. About the show, which I’m still contemplating catching up on, but I probably will sooner rather than later. Hope everyone enjoyed the scene! The next one is also written and currently just being proof-read/revised, so again there shouldn’t be too long of a wait. Maybe sometime this weekend or next week?
Thanks for reading! :-D
~ Jess S
A/N: Well, here’s the last chapter of Bloody Secrets! Please be mindful of the following warning, but hopefully enjoy the scene anyway. Many more notes to follow later…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

WARNING: The flashback in this scene is essentially what led to the ‘end’ of Felicitas first life in Carthage, namely when most of her family was killed. Her husband and two of their children do not survive the scene, which is fairly gruesome, and obviously there’s a lot of angst on our main character’s part, too, as a result. If a death scene involving young children isn’t something you can—or want—to stomach, I strongly advise you skip reading the flashback. If needed, I have included a brief summary of the flashback events’ at the end of the chapter, too. If you do decide to read it, you might want to have some tissues handy, I did.

Felicity's P.O.V.

Felicity ran a finger around the round rim of the wine glass, not caring that the red wine wouldn't sing as well as water would. Not when she was trying to remember that she really liked red wine. Not when she was telling herself that she knew it only looked a little like blood.

That blood she'd let Helena Bertinelli wound from her—the gushing spray she'd then had to hide like so many other secrets—wasn't even arterial blood. The deep dark blood that flowed through the arteries was closer in color to the Barbera blend’s hue. So, too, were the stains that the League of Assassins had barely allowed to fall in her home and then washed away without a word from her. The couch that she still had to replace hadn’t had any bloodstains on it, but all the damage done by swords and arrows wasn’t something she could’ve fixed or hidden last night, so like the blood and pottery shards it’d had to go.

At least the League had already found a replacement that fit her specifications, though why Nyssa al Ghul thought birdsong was the best way to relay that this morning rather than a nondescript text message from an unknown number she’d never understand. It was yet more proof that Nyssa was her father’s daughter though, not that her upbringing would allow anything else either way.

Secrets within secrets, breeding more secrets day by day, and night by night, too: where did one end and all the others begin?
“You look like you could use something stronger,” Oliver didn't startle her as he sat down across from her. He'd been playing his role of new club owner as he made his way around the club for quite a while now, before he’d finally escaped the eagerly effusive clientele by heading into the V.I.P section to this table that was exclusively reserved for the Queen family.

And her, apparently. At least according to the bouncer that'd directed her towards it a few minutes—or maybe an hour or so?—ago. When she couldn't bring herself to brave the crazier fan girls and risk spilling her wine. All the party girls weren't likely to be quite as crazy and vindictive as the Huntress, but their polished nails weren't anymore above scratching than their heels were above stepping. Or tripping into Oliver's arms. She had no desire to get in the middle of it all, but it was admittedly amusing to watch from afar.

Felicity shook the thought off as she looked back at the man himself, now sitting across from her and looking at her like they were the only two people here. “Maybe,” she answered the observation then. “But I prefer wine.”

“Red wine,” Oliver’s serious nod wasn’t at all mocking because of the little upturn of his mouth. “I remember.”

There was much more of a selection these days: far finer and expensively exquisite mixtures of flavors from all around the world, whenever and wherever you wanted them so long as you could afford to pay for it. But wine was still older than she was. In ancient times, her mother rarely dined without it. The princess of Carthage had been much younger than twenty-one when it'd first touched her tongue, but back then it'd still seemed a little like a rite of passage into adulthood: even in moderation, as her mother was always careful to insist long before it became a widely recognized truth.

The older brew was beer. Or maybe mead, but maybe not. Her brother had never cared to verify if even he knew. Methos had always favored beer, though she didn't doubt he'd deny that he took comfort in that familiarity.

After a moment Oliver spoke up again, his voice at that pitch that’d make it to her ears but no others over all the other noise around. Not an easy feat by any means, but then he had plenty of practice. “We need to talk,” he said

Felicity almost chuckled, but instead took a sip of wine before asking back, “About?”

Her vigilante sighed, “Helena never should've—"
“Helena Bertinelli's choices and actions are her own, Oliver,” Felicity cut him off, adamant about not letting him blame himself for the choices and actions of others. He carried enough weight around regarding his own actions as it was. “Not yours,” She shook her head and took a longer sip of wine, trying not to think about all the times she'd tried to tell her brother the same thing about the witch. Methos had never listened, not really, but hopefully her boyfriend wasn't quite as stubborn...

Oliver blinked, then frowned at her, clearly confused. “But she could've hurt you. She did scare you.”

“No,” the Immortal immediately shot that down, her pride not willing to let it pass by, whether she technically should or not. “She didn't scare me, Oliver.” Another sip of wine seemed very necessary as she stopped there.

“She didn't?” Oliver sounded about as skeptical as he could without actually trying to offend her with outright patronization, but the ancient had plenty of practice ignoring such things. When she wanted to, anyway.

“No,” Felicity answered again, firm and stead. Then she cocked her head to the side, going on with a measured, thoughtful tone. “I was worried about what she was planning, what she would do with the information she wanted from me. But I’m not afraid of her.”

Maybe she—as Felicity Smoak, anyway—should be, since the crazy woman had shot a crossbow bolt into her poor shoulder. But it’d been a long time since she really feared any death other than decapitation or burning. Because burning really hurt. So did getting shot, but somehow wounds that wouldn’t even leave scars that lasted longer than a few days didn’t seem worth worrying about. Not when that crossbow wielder was now trapped on the other side of the world and would be for years more likely than not.

“I still can't believe you tricked her,” Oliver shook his head, and this time it was the note of pride in his voice and the slight upturn of his lips that saved him from his own words.

Felicity still couldn't help but ask, “Excuse me? I thought we'd already established my technical skills?” she demanded only half in jest, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

Oliver chuckled as he leaned closer, one big hand going up to cup her jaw and tilt her head towards him. But instead of kissing her, he pressed his lips to her temple in a gesture that felt far more...
intimate than any quick peck could. "No one who knows you at all could doubt that," he assured her, the warm words murmured into her brow, just barely loud enough to be heard over the thumping beat from the dance floor down below. "My computer genius," He pressed two more quick kisses to her forehead before he pulled back, his hand sliding from her face in a clear caress.

Felicity had to smile a little as she looked at him again, wondering not for the first time since she'd met this man how she could be so lucky. Even when some of the warmth on his face gave way to his confusion's return and brow-furrowing worry.

"That you could make your computer fool her makes more sense than the Dark Archer helping her," Oliver's frown deepened all the more as he sighed. "Why would he help her?"

And he was back to that again, because of course he was.

Felicity didn’t want to answer, because they’d already talked about this and weaving the half-truths to avoid outright lies was downright exhausting. So she stayed silent via another savored sip of wine, and just listened.

The question was more for himself than her anyway: Oliver thinking out loud. It still made her nervous enough to glance around, but the special table set aside in the V.I.P section was far enough away from all the other—important but less important—tables to keep them from being overhead by anyone. Especially with the loud music still pounding a beat for the dance floor down below and all around them.

"Other than try to kill me, all he's done is taken out other people I'd already crossed off the List,” Oliver shook his head. “Helena's not even on it, and it's not like he'd need her help to kill her father.”

Felicity just took another sip of wine, still trying to just savor the taste while he went on, but focusing on the swirl of liquid on her tongue only helped her ignore her guilty conscious a little.

“Did she say anything to you?” he finally asked a question that really was directed at her, and the blonde frowned.

She supposed it really was too much to hope that he’d continue not asking. “You talked to her a lot more than I did,” Felicity reminded him, dodging. Each word was carefully chosen to still be the truth, but saying it still made her heart feel heavier.
“Not after she texted me, and you saw that, too,” Oliver said, still frowning, his serious blues studying her a little too intently.

“While she did a little breaking and entering to get another crossbow,” Felicity followed along, not minding the summary. It was the actual meeting with the bloodthirsty woman, where she might be now and how she’d escaped the S.C.P.D that the Immortal would sooner skip over. If only it could be that simple when it came to bloody secrets in the shadows…

“It took me seven minutes to get there, Felicity. You said she'd just left then. What did she say to you?” her vigilante pressed.

Felicity sighed, taking yet another sip of the wine that seemed to have taken on much more of the tannin taste than she generally liked. But it'd been at least a millennia since she'd felt more than a pleasant buzz from anything less than several bottles, and this was only from her second, so she kept drinking. “Some of the same things she said to you, I'd imagine. She wants to kill her father. He deserves to die for what he did. And thanks to my big mouth, she knew I could help her,” After another sip finished the glass, she reached for the half empty bottle on the table.

Oliver beat her to it, snatching the bottle and refilling her glass a little less than she would have herself. “How many of these have you had tonight?” he asked her with another frown as he indicated the partly refilled glass.

“Not enough,” the Immortal answered as she picked the glass up again for another sip.

Oliver was still frowning as he watched her, but he wisely didn't say anything more as he instead grabbed the other glass on the table and filled it for himself. “She didn't say anything about the other archer?” he asked again.

Felicity finished another slow sip before she answered. “Not to me,” she kept her gaze on the muzzy reflection in the bowl of her half full glass as she added, “She had a lot to say about you.”

There was a noticeable pause before Oliver answered this time. “I'm sure she did,” he sighed.

“She seemed pretty bitter,” Felicity continued offhandedly, not giving him too much time to think about it. “But anger and hatred have a way of doing that.”
Another moment of hesitation, then she could hear that his frown was born more from not unexpected confusion as he asked, “Doing what?”

“Twisting things,” the Immortal answered evenly, her eyes still studying the shadows in her wine while she tipped and tilted the glass to swirl the rich red drink: more to have something to stare at than to agitate it into opening up and breathing. “Twisting everything.”

With what the discussion and imagery brought to mind, however, watching the wine might not be her best idea yet...

FLASHBACK...

Carthage: 2,788 years ago...

“Papa?” Anaruz had been the first to notice something was wrong as they walked into the dining hall a little late returning from their training. Not at all an uncommon occurrence, and one they’d all gotten used to handling for everyday meals like dinner tonight.

In the months that Methos had been essentially teaching Felicitas how to teach with the eldest nephew that’d been like a son to her for most her life, the young man had come a long way. He might even be a great swordsman some day, though one could hope that was a long way off. And his mother would always pray that it was a skill he rarely needed—because the world they all lived in was far too dangerous for the impossible hope of him never needing to draw his blade.

Such optimistic thoughts of the future flew from Felicitas’ mind when she heard the fear in her boy’s voice, though, and the sight that’d put it there drove all hopeful thinking away entirely.

“Guards!” she shouted as she stepped around her son, catching his arm to pull him a little further into the room with her but releasing him before she knelt at her husband’s side.

Stomp-Stomp-Stomp-Stomp…

Her shout brought the two warriors they’d just past in the hall running right away, with the tumultuous clatter of many more feet not far behind them.

“Fetch the healers!” Felicitas snapped at the first one, even as she gently shifted her husband’s large, shaking form so that his head was resting in her lap instead of on the cold marble floor.

“Fetch the healers now!”

Stomp-Stomp-Stomp-Stomp…

Eligius’ dark eyes were locked on her, his lips trembling as he tried to talk, but opening his mouth let out only more trails of the blood that he seemed to be choking on. After a long moment of silent, gurgled lip movements, he pressed his mouth closed again. Then he strained so hard it hurt her to watch him move his hand to hers.

Felicity quickly closed the distance, trying not to let her own lips tremble when his usually so strong, warm hands felt cold and weak within her grasp. “What happened? Who did this?” she
asked, desperate for answers that she realized he couldn't give her even before she'd finished asking the questions, so she quickly hurried on, “No. No, don't speak,” She struggled to keep her breathing even and calm when her mind and heart were anything but as she made herself to look away from him and around the room.

The many warriors that were bustling in their armor with their swords drawn—as if swords could currently be of any use here—were irrelevant. There was no armed foe attacking here, so only the man she'd sent for the healers mattered right now. And he wasn’t back yet, so the healers weren’t here either.

Her eyes found her eldest again a moment later, and her heart stopped yet again.

Anaruz was kneeling like her, only he was on his knees between his siblings. Without the muscles that only time and years of training as he grew into a man would bring, it was a struggle for the boy of twelve summers to move even his seven year old brother's slight weight, so one of the warriors was quick to help him: moving the younger prince closer so that both royal twins were lying with their heads cradled in their big brother's lap like she was supporting her husband's.

Both of the twins had blood dripping down their chins like the uncle that'd been a father to them all their lives. When their mother, Eligius' little sister, had died giving birth to them a few short months after their father was killed in battle it had seemed only right to take all three of the children in. With no children of their own or any sign that their might ever be even one after years of marriage, it had only made sense to officially create the two newborns and the one older brother as Carthage's princes. It had surprised Felicitas only a little, how easy it was to be a mother to children that weren't naturally her own. It had been so easy though, to adore all three of them for the blessings they—like all children—truly were.

Never would she have ever imagined a sight like this.

Never, even in the darkest of nights—even that last dark night when her mortal life had first ended and her Immortality had begun—would she have ever been willing to torture herself with such thoughts.

But nightmares or fearful thoughts could never compare to the tragic reality that was so horrifically worse than they ever could be...

Didas' pretty, young face was screwed up in torment, her lips locked together like her father's as she tried to hold the blood back. Not that choking it back down did much good, but image had always been important to the little princess that was named after Carthage's first queen—the grandmother dead years before she was born—so her struggle wasn't surprising even as it tore at her mother's heart almost as much as the terrible fear in her eyes did. Terror that was only emphasized by the long lines of slow tears trailing from her big eyes...

Izeb's features weren't so entirely determined. He hardly seemed to notice the blood that was bursting from his mouth each time he coughed. But his face was contorted in just as much pain, the terror just as clear in his eyes as it was in his twin's, and the tears were just as many.

Felicitas bit back a sob as a barely-there tug on the hand her husband was still just barely capable of holding yanked her eyes back to him.

It took her a long second to realize he was trying to move her hand closer, and she tried to follow the lead of his weak motion until her hand rested on his sword. His sword, which was still mostly in the sheath at his waist, but not entirely. He'd clearly tried to draw it, but couldn't....
The Immortal’s frown sank farther in confusion, her eyes scanning his form again but seeing no sign of injury beyond the blood that kept pouring from his mouth, just like the twins’ mouths. Shared injuries that could only be the work of a powerful poison that’d somehow slipped the food tasters’ notice and made it to three royal tongues.

Felicitas looked around again, and her heart sank as she realized that one of the bodies that the warriors were moving off to the side of the room—one of the dead bodies—was a servant she recognized.

Jezebel had worked in the palace since Felicitas was a small child herself here. So when the aging lady hadn’t been able to continue completing the strenuous labor of younger women after a lifetime of service, the queen had given her the physically far easier job of food taster to the Princess Didas.

The man she was being laid down next to was Carthalo: one of many men that’d been born here in Carthage and named for their home in its early years. He’d been a warrior when Carthage had fallen temporarily to the same devious raiders that’d thus caused her First Death. It was thanks to him that none of the children in the royal nursery had been harmed the night their mother became an Immortal. Then, when it was evident the injuries he’d sustained that night made his continuing livelihood impossible he’d received the same offer the as aged Jezebel.

The taste-testers for two tiny royals who shouldn’t be the targets of anyone, for who could hate a young child nearly enough to ever call them their enemy? Let alone call for their death? The positions were still necessary, if only to get the now children used to the regular ceremonies that had to define royal lives. But the queen had never imagined either of those faithful servants would ever be in any real danger doing their jobs testing food.

Felicitas didn’t see her husband’s taste-tester on the floor, but that wasn’t too surprising. Mokrane had been ill recently, so Jezebel and Carthalo had been covering his duties, too.

Now they were both dead. Dead from the same poison that’d made it past their trained tongues to the royal table...

Eligius tugged on her hand again, with an increase in strength that was clearly from his incredible willpower and determination more than any recovery. Recovery didn’t seem possible when he was getting worse before her eyes.

Felicitas looked back at him, but then looked quickly away, towards the warriors congregated in the doorway that led to the healing wards. “Where are the healers?!” she snapped at them, continuing without waiting for a response. “Bring them here! Now!”

Stomp-Stomp-Stomp-Stomp…

Stomp-Stomp-Stomp-Stomp…

No less than a dozen men immediately complied, taking off as she bid at top speed, though the ones that stayed behind looked as hopeless as their queen didn’t want to feel right now. Didn’t want to. But did.

Buzz…

The by now mostly familiar assault on her still somewhat strange sixth sense faded almost as quickly as it’d come, because she spotted her teach almost as soon as he’d stepped into the room, so the forewarning of another Immortal’s presence wasn’t needed.
Felicitas almost asked him to do something—anything—to help her family, but the look on his face made her close her mouth without letting any of the words out.

Methos’ expression was somewhere between shocked and solemn, and it’d had that same edge of helplessness she was hiding herself, for just a moment before that solemnity dropped down to take its place. The man might be thousands of years old, but he owed his long, long life to his fighting skills and his natural Immortality, not any mastery of medicine...

Another determined tug on her hand, pressing her fingers around the hilt of his dagger now, made Felicitas look at it, and then at her husband again. She made herself meet his gaze again with a frown, “My Heart, there's no one attacking,” she told him, shaking her head slowly. “No, no, don’t...” she trailed off with a wince as Eligius forcing his head ever so slightly from side to side in denial made more blood flood down his cheeks and chin and throat. “Eligius, be still, please. The healers will be—"

“The healers won't be able to do anything.”

Felicitas' heart snapped towards the upturned table. She hadn't even noticed it'd been on its side, tipped all of the food upon it scattered over the marble floor, much of it all the way off the dais the royal family usually ate on. It had to have been her warrior-prince that'd thrown the poisoned food away before his strength completely failed him. Either to make sure she and Anaruz didn't eat it or attract the attention of the guards he hadn't been able to shout for like she did. Perhaps both.

The older Immortal that’d agreed to teach her, who’d gradually become her friend over the last several years, was crouching by one of the upturned bowls on the floor, frowning at the spilled food. As she watched he picked up a small piece of food and brought it up to his nose for a sniff, that immediately turned into a grimace. “Māzāryūn. A lot of it.”

Felicitas’ heart, somehow, sank even farther at the name. “No...” she shook her head slowly, swallowing as she looked between her husband and their children.

Māzāryūn was deadly even in trace amounts. A poisonous concoction that was the known weapon-of-choice on this side of the sea, because it wasn’t impossible to make hereabouts and it meant certain death if you swallowed any at all. The only saving grace for most targets in the region was that the poisonous plant that was the main component was very, very rare and required practiced patience to brew it into the even deadlier draught that most might not recognize as dangerous before it was too late...

Only Anaruz met her gaze again, his eyes clear with fear and the desperate hope for a miracle that couldn’t be shining through the tears that were still slowly dripping down his cheeks.

Eligius pushed her fingers around the sword hilt again, drawing her tearful eyes back to his.

“I... I don’t understand,” she finally had to admit, shaking her head. “There are no attackers here, My Heart. The healers are—"

“No going to be able to do anything," Methos cut her off again, his voice more morbidly mournful than she’d ever heard before. He sighed as he stood up and closed the few steps to where she was on the floor with her husband, kneeling beside them. Then he brushed her and Eligius's hands aside to draw the Champion of Carthage’s dagger.

“What-What are you doing?” Felicitas demanded slowly, not wanting to even consider the idea that she didn’t like forming in her head at all.
“Showing them mercy. Trust me, they want it,” the older Immortal answered her as he raised the weapon over the mortal man's chest.

“No!” Felicitas cried, not even thinking about it before she threw herself over her husband's trembling torso. After all his 'practical' lessons in what it meant to be Immortal she had mostly learned that the only death she had to fear was one which separated her head from her shoulders. Her neck, as the slender but all-too-important connection between the two, was what mattered the most.

Though if Methos wanted to kill her—really kill her, rather than the dozens, perhaps hundreds of temporary deaths he'd already put her through as object lessons—there wasn't really anything she could do to stop him. But that didn’t mean she was going to sit back and let him kill her family.

“Felicitas,” the ancient sighed, and instead of a blade through her heart she felt his hand gently grip her shoulder. His fingers were a bit finer than Eligius, but regular sword work lent him much the same calluses and strength. Compared to the warrior prince's cooling, shivering and sweaty torso and the cold hand in her grip, the Immortal's hand was like a firebrand. “Someone has to. Every moment we wait is only a moment more of needless agony for each of them.”

“No,” she shook her head frantically. “No, the healers will—"

“The healers can’t do anything, Felicitas. They can’t,” Methos sighed again, sounding so sad she’d feel bad for him if her whole world wasn’t crumbling right now. “You know that.”

“No,” she shook her head again. “No… No…”

If it really was Măzaryūn tainting there food, she did know that there was no antidote from the deadliest poison known in this region of the world. It’s existence was one of the reasons why the royal family had food tasters, but the fact that it hadn’t killed Jezebel and Carthalo quickly enough for their deaths to forewarn the royal family meant it had to be something else, didn’t it?

A larger hand wrapped around her upper back. It was too cold, and its strength had been banished by trembles that could never have taken hold of it naturally. But her husband had started with affectionate gestures in the early days of their marriage, almost right after their wedding ceremony had bound them and their nations together. That was back before she’d mastered his native tongue, when they could barely greet each other with words. So she couldn’t not recognize his touch as his hand moved slowly, laboriously up her back to finally catch the shoulder Methos let go of and then tug with a gentleness that wasn’t as foreign feeling as that shaky lack of warmth. Eligius had always been so gentle with her, almost always handling her like she was a delicate blossom that could all too easily come apart in his strong hands, but before tonight it had always been by choice—because he never wanted to hurt her—not because all the strength of his muscles was dwindling away with his life...

With their lives...

“No…” Felicitas couldn’t blink back her next tear as she pulled back to look down at him again. So it fell down her face like a line of lava, as unstoppable as all the anguish that was swallowing—choking, smothering—her heart.

Another line of blood was escaping his mouth despite his lips still being pressed together, but he didn't seem to notice that. All his attention was on her. His eyes were too dark, like he had spent a great deal of time in the dark despite the sun only now just sinking into the dark gold horizon and the flames boasted by every brazier and candle in sight. Too dark, but intent on her. And if the months it took her to master his people's difficult language had taught her anything (other than
patience and eventually her ninth language), it was how to read him without words.

“Death by Māzaryūn is an excruciating end, Felicitas. Trust me, I know. Truly. A dagger—anything else, really—is a mercy.” Methos insisted firmly, trying to hold her gaze as her own eyes darted away from the terrible truth that she saw there.

“No,” Felicitas shook her head again, slowly at first, then more frantically as she tried to protest. “Please, no…”

“You don’t have to watch,” Methos tried to tell her, the sadness in his voice almost hidden by the gentle tone of reassurance he was forcing for her. “You should take Prince Anaruz out into the gardens.”

“Mot can take the gardens!” Felicitas swore, her tears falling faster. “Just leave my family be!”

The silence that met her outburst was heavy with many things she didn’t want to think about. The least of which was that speaking the god of death’s name would call him nearer—after all with her husband and two of their children dying he must be already standing in this room or fast approaching it. It hardly mattered that discovering her own Immortality had made Felicitas question the validity of the religion that her mother’s people had brought with them when they settled here and her husband’s people brought into Carthage, too, with their marriage. If she was Immortal, after all, then where were all these other great deities who were supposedly all far above mortals?

She’d met only two so far that didn’t remind her of the hateful vandals who’d sacked her city when its main army was away. One was the one kneeling beside her now, whom the world had called ‘Death’ for a very long time, and yet he’d said many times that he was no god. The other was Cassandra, a woman who’d hopefully learn to move on from her painful past, even if she still wanted Methos dead much more than she’d ever want the help or apologies he’d freely given…

Methos sighed again. “You know it doesn’t work that way, Your Majesty.”

Felicitas froze at the royal title he hadn’t used once since he’d stepped into this chamber of death. The title he used more often in teasing than in any real seriousness. He had said more than once that she might well be the most benevolent ruler he’d ever had the honor of meeting, and certainly the most beloved by her people. Maybe, he’d said a few times, she was even good enough, and beloved enough, for her reign to continue through the ages with her peoples’ blessing. But he also said the world they lived in wasn’t often any ideal made reality, no matter how hard they fought to make it just that…

The man the world had known as Death wanted Felicitas to remember that she likely wouldn’t—couldn’t—always be Queen of Carthage. That most mortals wouldn’t abide an Immortal ruler forever: and fear could eventually overpower all the well wishes her wisdom and good intentions could inspire if she wasn’t careful. He wanted her to remember that at some point she’d have to leave Carthage and be just Felicitas. So outside of ceremonies and occasional fond jests, he had always used either the name her mother gave her or one of the many he’d made up for her, too.

To hear him use her title now... it made that end seem all too near.

“Mama?” Anaruz called to her then; and his voice sounded small and broken, just like she was.

The Queen sobbed, but forced herself to look over at the only one of her children that’d survive this day.
The twelve-year-old was looking between her and his siblings with wide, tortured eyes as he kept trying to comfort the twins.

Their bodies weren't just trembling like their father's anymore. Their limbs were convulsing so violently that several of the Carthagian warriors had knelt around the young royals to help their future king hold his tiny siblings steady. Not that their little fists or feet could do much damage to anyone wearing armor, but they could try to protect the children from feeling anymore pain...

Didas was clutching her stomach. One of the soldiers was carefully holding her feet still, but her hands were free. Her right hand kept falling away with every convulsion, too weak to hold on, but returning to her belly each time it fell. Her other hand was covering her mouth, trying to hide the blood that was now escaping her lips despite her best efforts with the convulsions.

Izeb' looked much the same, though he seemed to be trying to keep his head turned towards her now. Both his little fists were clutching the strong hands of the men who were helping his brother hold him.

Felicitas forced herself to meet his gaze again, hoping that he'd be able to read all the love she felt for him as easily as she could read his pain. Hoping that it wasn't hidden by her own fear and pain at what was happening.

“You should go,” Methos told her again, and promised. “I'll make it quick.”

“No,” Felicity answered again, this time shaking her head more slowly, objecting more calmly as she forced herself to seize onto all the lessons of her royal upbringing and all the experiences of her royal life that'd made her who she was today. “No,” she closed her eyes as she nodded slowly. “I... I should do it.”

Methos didn't reply right away, he paused for a second that felt like eternity, and when she made herself open her eyes again to look at him he was studying her with a frown. “You don't have to,” he told her softly, his tone now even. “I can do it.”

“And so can I.”

“Yes, you can,” the ancient nodded again. “That doesn't mean you have to,” he shook his head then. “If you're afraid you'll hold it against me, ask any man here. They're all sworn to serve you.”

“To serve me. To serve Carthage,” Felicitas nodded. “But, first and foremost, their duty is to protect... I-I cannot ask them to kill any member of the royal family.”

“A warrior knows the difference between an execution and a mercy killing, Your Majesty,” Methos told her, his tone now more neutral but his eyes still searching for something.

“I won't pass my responsibilities to another,” Felicitas forced herself to reply calmly. A violent shudder forced its way through her whole frame as she said it, but she still made herself reach for the blade that the older Immortal was still holding. “Give it to me.”

It was another too long moment before Methos shook his head again. “You don't know how.”

Felicitas blinked. “You've taught me—”

“How to fight,” her teacher cut her off. “How to kill, if you're lucky.” He shook his head again. “But this is far from the same thing. You don't know how to end someone's suffering mercifully, and the last thing you want to do is make these memories worse.”
She tried to shake her head, but her lips were starting to tremble at the thought. “But—”

“I have a lot more to teach you, Felicitas, and I’ll make sure you learn it all,” Methos told her with another serious nod. “Until you do, I will be your teacher. And as your teacher, burdens such as this are mine to bear.”

Felicitas stared at him for a long moment, but another barely-there tug on her hand brought her eyes back down her soon-to-be-dead husband’s head in her lap.

Eligius waited until their gazes were locked for several seconds, before he slowly, deliberately, nodded his head.

Felicitas swallowed, but then made herself nod. “...V-very well,” She looked at the ancient again. “What-What can I do?”

“Hold his hand. Talk to him,” the little grin Methos gave her barely lifted the corners of his lips, but her effort was clearly there. “Try to smile. A smile on a pretty face really does help.”

“I'm hardly 'pretty' right now,” she snorted.

“If he could talk, I'm sure he'd disagree,” Methos replied mildly, then his own eyes went to Eligius and he reached his unarmed hand out to squeeze the muscled shoulder that was trembling atop the marble. “I'll take care of her,” he promised.

Felicitas wanted to object—both at the thought that she needed looking after and when he raised the dagger again—but she knew she couldn't. With most other Immortals apparently running around killing each other all the time it wasn't like her husband would be wrong to be worried, and it would comfort him to know that a warrior as mighty as Methos intended to protect her when he was gone.

Still, watching that knife come down, angled to stab straight through her husband’s ribs and into his heart before being pulled swiftly back out again, would haunt the darkest corner of her brain for all eternity. Along with many, many other dark memories. Like the fear mixed with gratitude in the seven-year-old twins eyes when the ancient went to them next and she held their hands and talked to them through her tears. And all the blood that covered the floor from the fountains Methos had made of their chests...

The horrified realization that followed, however, would always stay with her, too. Once they were all still, all gone from the world.

Dead.

All three of them had died with their eyes open, holding her gaze like she deserved to be the last thing they saw in this world. But once she’d gently closed their eyelids and was watching the warriors of Carthage take them away, her only remaining child entrusted to the care of Felicitas’ own handmaidens once he’d made himself let her go, she’d finally found herself in the garden like her own teacher had suggested earlier.

Felicitas couldn’t allow herself to be seen like this, covered in the blood of her dead husband and children, but she couldn’t force herself to change either. Not yet. Somehow it seemed wrong to want to wash their blood away before the stains could become permanent in this dress that’d been a favorite of hers for a time, but would never be worn again.

Just like they’d never eat again. Speak again. Breathe again. Because their eyes weren’t closed in sleep, but in death. And unlike her, they wouldn’t wake up again anyway.
“Where’s Cassandra?” she’d finally asked her mentor as she’d wrapped her arms around herself while they watched the setting sun from the gardens. The view of the horizon stained with the vivid hues of sunset had always appealed to her before, but it was dark and cold now. But then, even the most magnificent sunset would feel frigid tonight.

When Methos didn’t answer right away, the queen shook her head.

“You’ve said yourself she’s a skilled healer. She’s taught our healers here so many things. Shouldn’t we have asked her if…” Felicitas trailed off when her eyes finally wandered to the ancient man, and seeing just how uncomfortable he looked making her pause.

Methos looked like the weight of the world was already on his shoulders. A look she’d seen on him a few times before, but the only time before now that he’d looked so guilty was when he was explaining to her why the older Immortal woman he wanted her to welcome into her city hated him so much. When he’d explained that the woman had every right to hate him. When he’d asked—almost begged—Felicitas to welcome Cassandra into her city anyway, no matter how much the madwoman raved against her friend and teacher.

“What?” Felicitas frowned, shaking her head. “Do you think she could have saved them?” she followed up with her initial question, thought it was something she should’ve thought of before it was too late.

Before it was much too late, which it was now.

“Maybe she could have done something,” the ancient man shook his head. “But I don’t think she would have.”

“Don’t think she…” Felicitas trailed off again, her brow furrowing. “Why…”

It took many long moments for the puzzle pieces to come together inside her head. And then, for the fifth time that day, her heart stopped beating. Horror held it still as she realized what Methos wasn't saying.

That her family wasn’t all but dead because an enemy of Carthage had hired a particularly clever, or at least lucky assassin, but because she’d let a monster into their home. At her mentor’s behest or not, she had welcomed Cassandra to Carthage and continued to extend her welcome when the madwoman’s ravings against the older Immortal had become more and more unreasonable. Had been relieved when the woman finally stopped demanding justice be granted to her, and seemed to accept that Methos was as welcome in Carthage as she was—more so, in fact. Not realizing that the woman’s madness might’ve found another target…

Rage like she’d never known flashed like a fire through Felicitas’ form as she spun on her heel and stormed back inside, stopping at the nearest pair of guards who were positioned right inside the archway. “Find Cassandra, the foreign healer, and bring her to me. Now!” she snapped when they didn’t immediately move.

The sharp command almost had both taking off down the hallway, but after a quick exchange of glances the older one, Aran, who’d worked in the palace almost as long as Jezebel had—shifted back to his post while the younger one ran away from his angry queen to do her bidding.

Stomp-Stomp -Stomp-Stomp…

“Felicitas…” Methos’ tone was only a little placating as he followed her into the hall, but she was now in no mood to be placated.
“Where is she?” Felicitas snarled, turning to glare at him. “Where?”

“Gone. I don’t know where,” he shook his head, sounding honest and regretful. “But she’s long gone by now, I’m sure. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...”

...END OF FLASHBACK.

“Felicity?” Oliver’s warm, concerned voice brought her back to the present, but his hand—hot and strong and alive—on her shoulder told her he’d caught her lost in thought. In some of her hardest, harshest memories.

Still, the Immortal had to blink at him a few times to remember where—and more importantly when—she was with him.

Oliver Queen. Verdant. Starling City. 2014.

“Are you alright?” he asked her, hand leaving her shoulder to cradle her face again. His hand as gentle on her face as it’d been on her shoulder. He was still being very careful of her shoulder, though it was healed of the injury he knew about and the one he didn’t: he was still so careful even after seeing her bared shoulder when it was completely healed. After she’d made sure he’d seen it, both before the Huntress had put a bolt in it and after she’d healed that, too. She’d found some of her summer nightwear last night specifically to make sure he’d seen that she was whole and uninjured again. Then, of course, she’d been thankful the man was a fantastic furnace she could cuddle up next to and fall asleep on the still cold winter night.

How hot his hand felt on her face told her she’d probably gone pale while she was lost in the ancient past. Still, that contrast was helpful. Settling.

“Yes,” Felicity made herself smile as she said it, but he didn't look like he believed her—then again she didn't doubt her eyes still looked sad. “Sorry, I was just lost in thought for a minute there.”

Oliver still didn't look reassured. “About?”

Felicity almost shrugged, but that carefree move wasn’t something she could let herself do after remembering that. So she shook her head instead. “Ancient history, painful but past.” she said it offhand again, and half expected some more pointed questions in response, but the halfhearted babble her tongue had ready to go was stopped before it could start when he nodded like that made perfect sense to him.
Muted surprise turned to confusion when instead of saying something vague about the last five hellish years of his life, Oliver asked her, “Something to do with your grandfather?”

“My grandfather?” Felicity repeated, really baffled.

Felicitas had never met her grandfather. King Mattan the 1st of Tyre died in 821 B.C. Several years before his daughter, Dido, found a new Pre-Immortal baby girl on the hill she’d won by wit and chose to make her both a daughter and a princess. But why would Oliver be asking her about him?

"...I never met my grandfather,” she answered honestly, half distracted by general confusion and the thought that maybe she wasn’t as immune to alcohol as she thought. Though she hadn’t even finished the second bottle yet, so that’d make her much more of a lightweight than she’d ever been before. At least since her First Death made her Immortal, anyway.

Maybe it was leftover from burning her Quickening so high to heal herself and then fending off Nyssa’s little test, too? But almost a whole twenty-four hours later, that didn’t seem likely…

And she had had to push herself harder before.

“I know,” Oliver stroked her cheek with his thumb, the warm motion almost distracting her from his bewildering words. “He was murdered a longtime before you were born, right?”

No, Felicitas was pretty sure the old king of Tyre had died in sleep. Though his body wasn't long cold before his son decided to ignore his wishes regarding the succession. Pygmalion and Dido were meant to rule Tyre together, with the wealth from Dido's husband helping them both. But Felicitas' uncle had not wanted to share wealth or power. Or, perhaps, his sister. Dido had always said everything happened for a reason, but Felicitas had always wondered what the man she might've called father was like—a political match or not, Dido had loved him till her dying day. Even if she'd died that day for her daughter.

The kingly grandfather that’d died of supposedly natural causes before that, however, had never really been more than a curious afterthought for Felicitas when she was growing up. And then really only when her mother had talked about Tyre, the home where Dido had grown up, been married, widowed in, and had to flee.

“I told you I did my homework,” Oliver went on slowly, still carefully watching her, his thumb still
smoothly warming her cheek and chin. “I saw the cold case. That they never caught the guy.”

*Finally* her brain managed to really reset and return all the way to the present: where she was talking to Oliver Queen as Felicity Smoak. And the only cold case he could be referring to was Donald Smoak's death, due to The Game.

Domhnall Cináed was an Irish Immortal and longtime friend of Felicitas, so she'd met his mortal wife Mary at their wedding a few years before Donna was conceived. As her ‘father’ couldn’t sire children anymore than any other Immortal—other than Mazin, maybe?—Donna’s inception had been courtesy test-tubes and an anonymous donor. But that certainly hadn’t meant Domnall/Donald was any less excited than his wife when the test came back positive, his joy had radiated through the phone when he’d called Felicitas.

So when she’d arrived in Las Vegas, expecting a happy couple awaiting the very near birth of the baby they'd asked her to be godmother to, it'd been a very unhappy surprise to find Mary Smoak in tears instead. Felicitas had eventually found the headhunter that'd killed her friend before he could meet his daughter, but it was a series of events she had to look back on sadly.

The only bright spot in all of it being that it had brought Donna into her life. On paper and digitally, at least, she was her fallen friend's granddaughter these days. Because the baby that she'd promised to be godmother to now played the part of her mother.

“Does that have something to do with why you really learned to sword fight?” Oliver pressed, his thumb still stroking her cheek.

It felt very warm and nice... but it was also very distracting, and as her brain came back online, Felicity knew she had to pull away. Apparently when she was in a morose mood the wine went to her head quicker than she thought, though the secrets and anxiety of late likely didn't help matters.

Why else would she ever make the mistake of wondering why Oliver would be asking about the long dead grandfather she'd never met even before both cities relevant to their family—and her first life—had crumbled into ancient ruins? The events of ages past weren't something the vigilante could've ever found out about from anyone other than herself, after all, and somehow she couldn't see herself talking too much about what led to her mother's flight from Tyre and the eventual founding of ancient Carthage around the same hill upon which Felicitas herself was first found upon. Even after she found the right way and the right moment to tell him about her Immortality…

*When*, not if, *when*…
Felicity shook her head. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she denied as she reached for her wineglass, which had at some point ended up on the table without spilling, so it was still half empty.

Oliver's hand caught hers before she could grab it, and he folded their fingers together. “Talk to me, Felicity,” He pleaded as his eyes found her own again.

For a moment, Felicity could only stare into the depths of his deep, warm blue eyes.

Then Tommy Merlyn was walking up to their table, and the Immortal didn't let her relief show only because she knew how Oliver would misinterpret that. “Hey, everything okay?” he asked as he glanced between them, his gaze stopped on Felicity first. “Mister Diggle said that bitch went after you, too, a few days ago?”

That Oliver didn't even try to defend Helena Bertinelli, and that put him a long ways ahead of Methos and his guilt-complex when it came to Cassandra...

Though either way, Felicity would’ve seized onto the distraction. “Yeah, she wanted me to hack the F.B.I for her,” the Immortal confirmed as she leaned back in her chair. It made her boyfriend drop his hand to the table while she took another sip of wine.

“But are you okay?” Tommy pressed, and the ancient gave him a smile in return.

“Yeah. I’m fine, thanks. Just tired. The last few days have been… long,” Felicity replied, taking yet another long sip of wine as soon as she’d finished.

It was a nice Barbera, which really tasted nothing like the wine she’d once enjoyed in Carthage: but why would it? The low slopes and valleys it came from in northern Italy were thousands of miles away from the ruins of her former home. Add to that the art of winemaking had changed a great deal over the millennia, and as Rome had fallen so long ago that even she couldn’t hold that grudge against the people that couldn’t remotely be accused of any of their ancient ancestors crimes. At the same time, it was still a semi-familiar comfort all the same.

“I’ll bet,” Tommy acknowledged with a nod. Considering his still wrapped hand and how said wrapping had become necessary, he did: to a point. Though she didn’t think that was what was behind the look he shot his friend as he went on. “You should do something nice. You know, to
help you—to help both of you—unwind more.”

That look was meant entirely for Oliver, then, as were the words the other man was saying. His longtime friend was clearly aware of that, too, though, so Felicity sipped some more wine before responding. “Maybe. Not much free time these days though.”

“Hey, you don’t need to hop on a plane or anything like that,” Tommy told her, clearly very invested in the idea of making his friend take a break. Or maybe it was not to make both his friends take a break. Either way, it was a welcome change from his almost-avoidance of his childhood friend since the discovery of his alter-ego. “Maybe just a nice dinner. Have you been to Table Salt, yet? It’s the new place on East and Main?”

“No, though I think your mom might want to go there again soon,” Felicity told Oliver. “She mentioned their Tuna Tar-Tar while we were out at lunch.”

“Yeah, I think she’s mentioned it a few times, actually.” Oliver frowned. “Thea has, too. Does she like tuna now?” he asked his friend, looking like he very much doubted it. “She used to hate it.”

“Pretty sure she still does…” Tommy hazarded, but he didn’t look much more certain than Oliver did.

Felicity rolled her eyes, but took another sip of wine instead of saying something. The slight, thoughtful furrow that’d appeared on Oliver’s brow told her that the right seed had been sown there. He’d take his mother and sister out to eat soon: or at least try to spend more time with them. Now if only the two men could get around to what they were actually aiming for here.

She was pretty sure Tommy thought Oliver should ask her out again. Maybe because he thought the archer had something to make up for—something to do with the Huntress by the sounds of it. Or maybe he thought Oliver was moving to slow with her, but Felicity didn’t think that could be it. Or, if it was, he was really going overboard in his efforts to bounce back from the angry friend to the pushy best friend who was trying too hard to be helpful.

“Fine, fine,” Oliver said a long minute later. “I’ll take Mom and Thea to Table Salt soon,” he glanced at his friend. “How long’s the wait for their reservations now, anyway?”

Tommy blinked at him. “What?” then he frowned. “You’re not cut-off now, too, are you? ‘Cause that’ll make this place a lot harder to run…”
Felicity snorted, she really couldn’t help it. When both men looked at her, she shrugged. “Yeah, you’d have to turn this into a self-reliant business. Imagine that.” She shook her head before either one could frown too deeply. “From what I’ve seen in your accounts the last few nights, Verdant is doing fine.”

“Yeah,” Tommy said quickly. “Yeah, it is. But—”

“I haven’t been cut-off, Tommy,” Oliver interrupted before he could get going. “Not sure my mom would ever have it in her to do that, but she can’t cut me off from my dad’s assets—his will was pretty specific for all of us.”

And the Queen lawyers must’ve had a hell of time sorting all that out months ago after Oliver came back from the dead. Felicity had good cause to know: as it’d become an increasingly more intricate—and technological—aspect of Immortality over the last few decades. It was almost an art form even before that, of course, but time and the digital age especially had made it increasingly complex.

That was more why Methos had started studying computers back in the nineties. Yes, their continuing educations had continued to be an ongoing competition of sorts over the ages, but her brother’s greatest survival skill really was his capacity for adaptation. It was why Felicitas had followed his lead many times over the ages, though the computer age was a particular triumph for her: both because she was considerably better with technology than he was and because it was an interest she’d started to pursue long before he did. Methos really only started dabbling with computers; back when he was ‘undercover’ as it were as a brilliant linguist among the academic Watchers, and by then Felicitas was already an expert.

Which was also why so many of their Immortal friends came to her for most kinds of technological help they might need, especially if it was something related to their Immortality. ‘Dying’ and making sure that you could start over somewhere else with more than just what you could carry—preferably all the assets you’d acquired—wasn’t simply a matter of sneaking out of a hospital morgue, after all.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry,” Tommy said suddenly, and he was shaking his head sharply when Felicity looked back at the two men again.

Okay, she’d clearly missed that silent conversation, but in the long run it probably wasn’t too important. Though maybe she should stop drinking… after she finished this bottle.
Thankfully, whatever she’d missed here wasn’t important enough to distract Oliver from his friend’s—their friend’s—poorly hidden unhappiness. Then again, the archer would have to be blind not to see it as soon as Tommy had finally gone quiet for a bit, starting to mull over his own glass of wine—wait, when did he steal her wine, too?

Felicity didn’t let that question slip out, though, because in the long-run it just wasn’t important. Instead, she followed both men’s gazes across the balconies railing, across the club and down to the bar below, where a visibly unhappy Laurel Lance was also nursing her own glass of wine.

What was Tommy even doing up here?

Oliver was clearly wondering the same thing. “Everything okay?” he asked his friend, like the answer wasn’t obvious.

Tommy winced, “She asked about this,” he raised his still hurting—and still wrapped—hand with a grimace. “Didn’t know what to say, so I tried to feed her a stupid story ‘bout a blender.”

Oliver’s wince was sympathetic. “She didn’t buy it, huh?”

Felicity snorted, and rolled her eyes when they two men looked back at her. “You know, you two could try to not be surprised that she’s not stupid.”

“What?” Oliver frowned at her.

Felicity gestured to Tommy’s wrapped hand. “You said yourself that it was a stupid story. Why would shy buy it if she’s not stupid?”

Tommy winced again. “Not really helping, Smoaky.”

“You could’ve said you fell and caught yourself wrong. Or you stupidly told one of the bouncers you interviewed to show you how they’d handle a really rough drunk.” Felicity shook her head. “Instead you said, what, that a blender attacked you?”

“Got in a fight with one, actually.”
The Immortal rolled her eyes, “You’re almost as bad as him.”

“Hey,” her boyfriend protested half-heartedly.

In response, Felicity just raised an eyebrow at him. “You ‘ran out of sports bottles’—but happened to have a syringe that looked like a weapon handy?”

Tommy glanced between them, smirking a little already as he asked, “Do I even want to know?”

Oliver wasn’t quite managed to hide the awkward embarrassment or his own amusement at the same memory, but he didn’t say anything right away in response.

So instead Felicity spoke up, “You should tell her the truth,” she said, and both men started at her. Maybe it was a bit contradictory of her, given all the secrets she was hiding, but that was also why she was speaking up in the first place. Because, unlike her and Oliver, Tommy didn’t have to hide so much from his love-interest…

“What?”

“No he—”

“Telling her the truth doesn’t mean telling her everything,” the Immortal interrupted firmly, ignoring their frowns. “It just means telling her what you can, when you can.”

“I can’t tell her one of Ollie’s ex’s broke my hand, Smoaky.” Tommy didn’t quite whine, but it was pretty close.

Felicity rolled her eyes again. “She didn’t break your hand. She twisted your thumb and your wrist. And they’re already starting to feel better, right? You can tell Laurel all that. You can tell her someone attacked you on opening night, but you didn’t want to make a big deal about it—didn’t want to spoil the big occasion. It’s not the sort of thing that’d help grow your business, after all. The person who hurt you has, of course, been banned from Verdant, and now you really just want to put it all behind you. Which is hard while you still need to have your hand wrapped up, but hopefully the bandages can come off soon.” She raised an eyebrow at him, not reacting to either his or Oliver’s stunned eyes. “Is there any part of that story you can’t say?”
“I…” Tommy blinked at her. “Well, I…” he shook his head after a moment, “I guess not. But you don’t know Laurel, Smoaky. She’ll want more. Specifics. She’ll keep after—”

“That’s where the right lies come in,” Felicity told him. “The ones you have to tell. Mixed in with the truth, so that you can make them sound like the truth, too. So that you can say them without looking—or feeling—too guilty. And so that she can believe them.”

Oliver looked at his friends and started to offer, “I could try to talk to her, Tommy—”

“No,” Felicity cut him off, shaking her head again. “That won’t help him, Oliver” she told him, then looked back at Tommy. “If you want to make this work, you have to work at it, Tommy. All relationships need it at some point. In business, between friends and family, and especially between lovers…” she frowned as she finished adding more to herself, “Lovers… no matter how you sat it, it still sounds creepy, doesn’t it?”

It shouldn’t, because love was a good thing. But maybe it was supposed to be bigger than any identification, and so the noun over simplified it? And she was definitely over thinking it…

Both men huffed light, slightly surprised laughs, each of them grinning a little at her.

Felicity forced herself to go on further, shaking her head as she caught Tommy’s eyes again. “The truth isn’t everything all the time, Tommy. No one can do that. But it is saying the right things—and saying enough—when they need to be said. So that we can all live with each other.” She watched him think through that, not at all unaware that Oliver was thinking about it, too—she could see that out of the corner of her eye—but she kept her focus on helping his friend right now. “The longer you let it go, the more you don’t say? That’s when everything starts to weigh on you. That’s when it all starts to fall apart…” she trailed off, still watching him for a moment, then she asked, “Do you understand?”

“I… I’m not sure,” Tommy admitted with a frown. “I get what you’re saying about needing to work at it to make us, together, work.” He shook his head. “I think I’ve worked harder at this, harder at being with her then I’ve ever worked at anything in my entire life.”

“That’s not a bad thing.” Felicity told him. “That shows you care, and you know it.”

“Yeah,” he nodded, then grimaced. “But the telling partial truths thing—”
“You can’t think of it that way,” Felicity cut him off again. “You have to get it right in your own mind and tell it that way.”

“Huh?” Tommy blinked at her.

“You were attacked here, on opening night,” the Immortal specified for him. “That’s true, right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“The person responsible is now banned from the club. The bouncers won’t let them back in. Right?”

“They weren’t supposed to let her in to start with,” Tommy grumbled.

And Oliver had to reject, “And Laurel will just want to see the banned list.”

“Yeah, he’s right,” Tommy winced. “She’ll keep after it till she sees it. Or she might even send her dad… which wouldn’t be pleasant.”

“Detective Lance and his daughter can look through the security tapes all they want. They won’t see anything because it was busy that night, and the actual attack happened in the basement, which isn’t public. So there aren’t any cameras down there.”

“Lance can’t go down there, and neither can Laurel,” Oliver pointed out at the same time as Tommy said:

“But then they’ll want to go down there.”

“If the detective allows himself to be dragged into the middle of this and the tapes aren’t enough, he’ll have to get a warrant for anything more. And he’ll have a heck of a time with getting that, since you’re the victim who’s not pressing charges and he’s already on a short leash around Oliver. It’ll look like he’s still holding a grudge because of the Gambit, at best, or that he’s harassing his daughter’s current boyfriend.” Felicity shook her head. “It’d surprise me if he let himself be put in that position, even for Laurel. He’s not stupid, anymore than his daughter is.”
“But if Helena’s the only one on the list of banned—”

“She’s not,” Digg cut Oliver off, making both Felicity and Tommy start because they hadn’t heard him coming up behind them, but she wasn’t too surprised. In this environment only someone who was a potential threat would stand out to her. And Oliver, who’d undoubtedly watched his approach, was only frowned at the bodyguard because of what he was saying as he shrugged. “She’s on the list, yeah. But she was even before opening night, right?” the bodyguard looked at Felicity. “Looked like you put just about everyone with a record of violent crime in Starling on there?”

“Kind of,” Felicity admitted with a shrug of her own. “Not every crime, and it’s not just based on convictions—most of the Triad can’t come in here, but I made exceptions for the Bratva—stuff like that. Anything that made sense, really.” She looked back at Oliver, going on before Tommy could ask why she’d made exceptions for the Russian mob, assuming he even knew that was what the Bratva was. “And Helena was already wanted for multiple murders.”

The vigilante nodded slowly, “She was.”

Tommy still looked like he was debating asking about the mentioned exceptions, but that wasn’t a debate they wanted to have right here, whether the people all around them were at least tipsy and not nearly close enough to hear over the music or not.

So Felicity spoke up again before he could ask, “You two should come over tomorrow night,” she told him. “Join Oliver and I for a movie night.” Without waiting for a response she nodded to Digg, too. “You and Carly could come if you want—”

“Thanks,” Digg said, then shook his head. “But we’ve got plans. A.J’s got this big science fair project due soon, and we haven’t even started yet.”

“Ooh, fun,” Felicity grinned. “Let me know if you need any help.”

“Thanks.”

When she went back to Tommy his expression was thoughtful. “A movie might be fun,” he admitted, then frowned and looked at Oliver. “You know what she’s gonna wanta watch.”
Oliver blinked at him, apparently not remembering any particular favorite of his ex. “What?”

“Mister and Missus Smith,” Tommy said with a deliberate sort of emphasis on each word, an emphasis that the vigilante understood because it was either that or the mention of the specific movie itself that made him groan.

“She’s still on about that?” Oliver shook his head. “Why didn’t she ever just watch it?”

“Got me,” Tommy shrugged, before wincing. “Though I kinda dodged it a few times, ‘cause I knew it was a problem between you two…”

“Better rip off the band-aid, then,” Felicity interjected, not caring that she was again clearly missing a little of the story. What was being said was more than enough to figure out what was between the lines. “And it’s not a bad movie. So, my place, tomorrow. Say, eight o’clock, ‘cause I don’t wanna cook dinner?”

“We could always get takeout,” Oliver put in.

“Just not Thai food, please,” Tommy added, then said. “So, seven?”

“How about six?” Oliver countered, meeting Felicity eyes steadily when she frowned at him. “You know, you can leave work at five, like everybody else. My mom said your department isn’t really doing anything till the end of next week anyway, ‘cause you need more staff, right?”

Felicity fought off a sigh, because clearly the archer was going to keep after her on this. Like a dog with a bone it was angry at and determined to destroy. “Fine,” she finally sighed. “Six-thirty, then.”

“Fine by me,” Tommy nodded, before throwing what was left of his wine back as he got up. “I’ll let you know what she says.”

“Good luck, buddy,” Oliver called after his friend as both of them watched him head for the stairs back down out of the V.I.P balcony. But when Felicity looked back at him, Oliver was frowning.
“What?” she asked, because she couldn’t really say anything else.

“What about your couch?”

The Immortal rolled her eyes, taking another sip of wine before she replied, “I’m getting one delivered tomorrow. It’ll be fine.”

No matter how many secrets still had to come out, with bloodshed, tears, or just a lot of words, she had to believe that in the end everything would be alright. Because the alternative was unthinkable…

The End

of

Bloody Secrets!

FLASHBACK SUMMARY for anyone who felt the need to skip it: Felicitas & her eldest adopted son arrived late to dinner after sparring, and found the rest of their family dying from their poisoned meal. The poison they were killed with was powerful and provided a dawn-out, painful death, so Methos volunteered to end their suffering with quick mercy-killings. Afterwards, Felicitas realized that the culprit responsible was the other Immortal in the city who had extensive knowledge herbs, exotic plants, etc. as an accomplished healer and who hated the queen of Carthage because she refused to take her side against Methos and had, in fact, pardoned him for his past crimes after an official trial… continues in A/N.

NEXT: Now, after Bloody Secrets we have:

Interlude: Meanwhile in Seacover…

Methos finds out about Felicity’s new job.

Interlude: Double-Date or Couples Therapy?

Watching a movie with friends isn’t meant to come with baggage, but then again that might depend on the movie and the friends… or Felicity thought inviting Tommy and Laurel over for a movie with popcorn and wine would be a good idea, why? And why would Laurel’s first choice be Mr. & Mrs. Smith?
Chapter End Notes

A/N: And there we have the end of Bloody Secrets! Finally! *deep sigh of relief* Sorry it took me so long to get here. It really wasn’t planned that way, but real life does tend to get in the way of fan fiction plans. Hope it was worth the wait anyway. Like I said, the flashback was pretty much the end of Felicitas’ first life in Carthage. There will probably one more scene about that, pertaining to when she actually left, but this scene was the ultimate cause—the last straw, if you will. This scene was basically supposed to show: (1) why Felicity hates Cassandra so much, (2) why she can relate to Helena somewhat, (3) why she DIDN’T want to help the Huntress anyway. I think the flashback spoke for itself pretty well to all of that, though it wasn’t all spelled out.

While this scene was pretty graphic/gruesome; I felt it was necessary for the series long-term character arc. For two main reasons:

1) Felicity doesn’t, I think, hate easily as a character—she’s more inclined to forgive, so I thought that for her to have held a grudge against someone for thousands of years, she’d have to have a pretty good reason. She has one other grudge she kind of got over that’ll come up a few times, but it’s not against a person so I don’t think it needed as much explaining.

And 2) Cassandra wasn’t supposed to be seen as a villain in the Highlander canon, but I personally think she’s a fantastic one, and it’s not just because Methos is my favorite character & she wants him dead more than anything. Brief summary of my take on that canon: In Highlander Cassandra is an ancient Immortal who was once a slave to Methos while he was one of the Four Horsemen, fell in love with him over that timeframe, but that love turned to hate after he didn’t protect her from Kronos and she had to kill him & flee. Methos let her escape, leading to trouble with Kronos, whom he wisely feared, and probably ultimately leading to why he eventually betrayed the Four Horsemen and left that life behind. The comparison between Kronos and Methos is a fairly straight-forward one: Methos’ specialty is survival (and I’d say adaptation), while Kronos specialty is definitely killing backed up by a massive bloodthirsty streak that’s still strong when we meet him in the modern era thousands of year later…

Fast-forward about 3,000 years & our first meeting with Cassandra is when she finds the Highlander/Duncan MacLeod as a young teenager (before he became Immortal), and saved him from one of her students by hiding him with magic because he’s one day prophesized to kill said student, who’d turned against her as soon as he was sure he’d learned everything she had to teach him. Like her student, Cassandra can control people by directing her Quickening through her words, the Watchers call it ‘The Voice,’ she called ‘The Power,’ and it’s something we see her use a few times. We see her student use it more aggressively, but he’s supposed to be a villain. We’re led to believe that Cassandra can also shape-shift into the form of a wolf, the same wolf that’d been bothering the MacLeod clan in that timeframe and led to Duncan not being in the village when Kantos came looking for him, but that’s not something that I remember being confirmed so it’s more likely she could control the wolf. Essentially Cassandra knew that Duncan was the one that’d one day be able to kill her traitorous
student, so she made sure of it by keeping him safe when Kantos came looking for him and also seducing the 13 year old. She didn’t sleep with him, but she allowed him to see her bathing and later kissed him after he’d had a dream about her. When she returns in the modern era it’s because Duncan’s finally a powerful young Immortal capable of killing Kantos, which he ultimately does. Afterwards, of course, they sleep together. But the flashback scene with her basically seducing him when he’s 13 so that he’ll want her (and want to protect her) later always struck me as creepy, and so did how freely she used her Voice/Power on Duncan. As did the fact that she’d basically been manipulating Duncan for hundreds of years to get the end she wanted. Never mind that the next time we see her she wants to kill Methos. So she has the makings of a great villain in my mind, hopefully it manages to come across here, too.

And yes, I had Felicity use the same sort of power, which she calls ‘The Force’ in reference to Star Wars, but she uses it much more sparingly, I think, and she doesn’t like using it, so it’s not the same thing. Mainly because she really isn’t selfish, whereas Cassandra definitely is? Hopefully that all makes sense?

As I already mentioned previously, there’s still two more scenes—interludes—before the next story. They’re scenes that I wanted to put in this story, but that they didn’t quite seem to fit that well… But we made it to the end here anyway! Thanks for coming along for the ride! Comments are always immensely appreciated!

Works inspired by this one: [Guardian Angel by Lexi_the_dragon_muse](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!